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To Her, Men Were the Weaker Sex

SCYLLA

An ACE
Original
by

**MALDEN
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SCYLLA
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“She was just Scylla Zubitch, a girl with a beautiful body and nothing else of value, and this man patting her leg was just another man who wanted the only thing she had to offer anyone.”

But she was determined to make the most of what she had, even though it meant cutting out of her heart all warmth and decency. And she was ready to wait—and hunt—for the perfect sucker.

Milt Parson raised rabbits and needed a housekeeper, and when Scylla answered his call, the scene was set. Soon Milt would be reduced to the frantic abjectness of one of his own buck rabbits scrambling for sexual crumbs—and his final fate would become just a matter of time . . . and Scylla's careful planning.

It is with pride that ACE Books presents this exceptional original novel. In this penetrating and merciless portrait are all the shades and the colors of a devastating relationship that only a skilled writer could depict.

***Turn this book over for
second complete novel.***

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SCYLLA ZUBITCH

She thought of herself as a rock that could not be swept up in any man's passion.

MILTON PARSON

A lonely young man who taught Scylla the art of butchering defenseless animals.

SAMUEL J. PETERSON

In a darkened motel room, he was the first to recognize Scylla's physical talents.

DON BRADFORD

Though he worked in a movie house, he was slated for a more dramatic role than any he saw there.

JONATHAN WILLIAMSON

An attorney who had a document wrapped up in some astonishing red tape.

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT GRAYSON

Years of dealing with human furies and follies had taught him the wisdom of patient waiting.

SCYLLA

by

MALDEN GRANGE BISHOP

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

SCYLLA

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Although most of the places mentioned are factual, all characters in this book are fictional creations of the author.

—o—

TO ANN

Any resemblance to Scylla is purely accidental

—o—

WALTZ INTO DARKNESS

Copyright, 1947, by William Irish

Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER I

Scylla Parson, née Scylla Zubitch, had her eyes closed, but she was not asleep. Scylla Parson was thinking with all the consciousness of her being. Whenever Scylla thought, when she consciously planned and schemed how she was to accomplish a thing, she had to lie very still. She had to close her eyes to all sights, so that she could hide away in the darkness of herself. She had to close her ears to all sounds, even the sound of her breathing, so that she could hear only the silence of herself. She had to close her mouth tightly and seal off all tastes. She had to shut off all sense of smell and to deny the sensations of feel coming through the thousands of nerve ends throughout her slender body.

When Scylla Parson disconnected her senses, then she could think. When she denied her womanliness, when she disregarded the femininity of the curve of her generous breasts, the turn of her ankles, the softness of her stomach, the warmth of her lips, then she could do her best thinking. It was then that she could force her mind into logical patterns, could hone her thoughts to a razor keenness, and could calculate all the risks.

Over the city of Los Angeles the night had long since taken command. Most of the people of the city slept — but Scylla Parson didn't sleep. Most of the people throughout the city turned and rolled occasionally as they slept, each time relaxing further into the deepness of sleep.

But Scylla Parson never moved once.

She lay on her back, her hands closed into loose fists on top of her breasts. Her legs stretched out straight and close together until she could almost touch the footboard of the double bed. Her whole body was relaxed. Yet it was a relaxation of command, because Scylla Parson did not want the tensions of her body to interfere with the tensions of her mind.

There were sounds of the night all around Scylla Parson. On the other side of the bed was the sonorous sound of the man's breathing, and the protests of the springs as the man twisted and turned, sometimes pulling the sheet around him as he rolled up in it, drawing it tight between them. But he could never pull the sheet from her body. She had it safely tucked beneath her. She never heard the sounds of him and

never felt the tautness of the sheet when he pulled at it in his sleep. She refused to allow his acts and his sounds to intrude upon her thinking.

From outside the house came the sounds of cars whizzing by on Willowbrook Avenue. From overhead came the droning of planes approaching the International Airport, ten miles away, and the interurban cars clanged by at regular intervals. When man-made sounds did not drown them out, the cries of the night birds in the pepper trees and the rumblings of rabbits playing in their hutches out back of the house could be heard. But Scylla did not hear any of these sounds. Her mind was fixed upon the problem before her, the problem which had been years in the making and which now must soon be resolved.

There was only one resolution to the problem, to Scylla's way of thinking. That was her way. There had never been any other way in her life, only Scylla's way.

It was now just a question of arrangement of details. She had to think each step out completely. She had to calculate the risk in each step and prepare her defense. She had to school herself in how to act and what to say in case some risk proved greater than she had calculated.

Suddenly Milton Parson flopped over, and his long arm came down loosely across Scylla's breasts. It was a momentary shock to her. But only for a fleeting instant, because Scylla Parson had long ago taught herself not to be startled and shocked.

She grasped the arm at the wrist and flung it back from her with such force that the man was rolled back over. He groaned, swallowed, and his face grimaced in the moonlight across the bed. But he did not awaken.

However, it was enough to disrupt Scylla's concentration. Before she could again place herself in a trance of thought, she had to have a cigarette. And Milt had carried them into the bathroom.

Her strong hand flipped back the sheet from her naked body. The corner of the sheet fell across the face of Milton Parson and momentarily interrupted his snoring.

Easily she picked her way through the darkened room without the aid of a light. She knew where the cigarettes would be. On the edge of the wash basin where he always left them after he had carried them to the bathroom. She reached out her hand and felt the pack of cigarettes and the book of matches.

Her hand closed on the pack, but the book of matches

slipped through her fingers and fell to the floor. She cursed and leaned down to feel for them. As she leaned down, her breasts swung free of her body, and one of them caught on the edge of the wash basin. Her downward movement was too fast to stop in time. The breast was crushed between her body and the cold hardness of the wash basin.

"God damn!" she cried out in pain. She straightened up, holding the aching breast.

Then she leaned down again, careful this time, and found the matches.

Angrily she strode back to the bedroom. Her dark eyes glared as she saw the dim shadow of Milton Parson sprawled across the bed. He had rolled over, and his outflung arm and leg crossed the part of the bed where she had lain.

She grasped his hand and threw his arm up and over. "Get over," she commanded.

The sleeping man groaned, turned flat on his back.

She put a knee on the edge of the bed and then stopped, looking down at him. Even in the darkness she knew every detail of him. She knew his long, thin body clad in the wrinkled striped shorts, which added to his length, and the baggy undershirt. She knew his thin and bony frame. His nose was pointed, and when he swallowed, as he did now, the knot of his Adam's apple moved up and down.

"Look at you!" she spat. "Eight years!"

It was eight years since she had married him. At that time he had been slender, but not skinny and bony. His nose had been thin, but not pointed. His Adam's apple had hardly been noticeable.

Her right hand dropped down on the bed as she bent over as if to get a closer look at him. Her eyes burned with her hatred of him. This man, like all other men, but mostly this one man, had cheated her.

The other knee came up on the bed, and the other hand went down to support her. On all fours, she continued to stare at him. She hated him with all the fierce savagery of her strange being. Yet in all her hating there was a stirring in her. The pain in the breast which had been crushed had started that something stirring again in her. In spite of all her hatred she felt a deep need for this man.

She hated herself as much as she hated him for having this need. Yet she knew that neither this man nor any other man could ease the ache in her, could fulfill the horrible need. She hated this man beneath her, yet she wanted him. She looked with scorn at him, yet she looked with hunger.

But she knew it was no use. Slowly she forced herself to move away from him. She crawled back to her side of the bed, dropped down on the sheet, and after a moment turned over to lie straight and still again.

She did not notice when the heavy breathing of sleep left him. It wasn't until his thin body was easing down on hers and his seeking face was above hers that she became aware of him.

"Scyl," he breathed. "Scyl."

The tensions in her broke. Her hands went to his chest as she gave her hips a violent twist. The suddenness and the force of her movements flipped him back to his side of the bed.

"Scyll" he cried. "It's me." He scrambled back. "Didn't mean to frighten you. Scyl, I love . . ."

"For Christ's sake, Milt!" she snapped. "Why don't you . . ."

He was back over her now. "Aw, Scyl, please . . ." There was that pleading note in his voice again. God, how she hated him for that! Always he pleaded, asked, begged.

"Scyl, please! Come on!"

She wanted to throw him off again, but somehow the heat of his body had reached her, and she liked it. But she hated herself for liking it. "Damn you, Milt!" she said.

"Aw, Scyl, please!" he repeated, his face close to hers.

"Can't a woman . . ."

He stopped her protest with his lips fastened to hers. Slowly she felt the response growing in her body. Then it began to leap. His hands began to move over her. Her mouth slid down across his sharp chin and then to his throat. Her lips kissed, but then her teeth felt his Adam's apple, and she had a strange desire to sink them into his throat until the blood spurted.

A vision of his blood spurting out of his throat into her mouth, onto the bed, and running off the bed to the floor filled her. She found herself caught between this vision and fiery sensations coursing through her body in response to him.

Deep down inside her was the sense that unless she checked her own passions, they would burst into a flame which would consume her and this man, too. She was afraid of the fierceness of such uncontrolled passions, afraid of where they might carry her. She was afraid of the enormous need within her and the capacity of this man, or any man, to satisfy that need. He was incapable of meeting her fire with an equal fire. How could he when all other men had failed to match her?

It had always been like this when she reached the barrier she had erected around herself. She was afraid to go further. And she refused now to drop the barrier. She began to force her passions to halt, to retreat.

In still deeper recesses of her being was a longing for this man to crash down the barriers she had erected, a hope that somehow he would defy her and smash the locks of the gates she had fastened, that he would tear them open – and in so doing would tear her open to a fulfillment.

But she knew he would not, could not, and she despised him because he wouldn't and couldn't. This is how this man, like all other men, had always cheated her. They were weak; she was strong.

Suddenly she flung him off and rolled away from him. His hands tried to follow her. "Scyl! Scyl!"

She struck his hands away from her. "Go to sleep," she ordered.

"Scyl . . . I . . . I thought you were . . ."

"Shut up, God damn you!"

"Please, Scyl. You let me get all . . ."

"For Christ's sake, shut your God-damned mouth."

He lay back on his side of the bed. She reached out to the night stand and took a cigarette from the pack. She found a match and struck it. In the flame she saw his face out of the corner of her eye. Fool, she thought.

"I can never understand you, Scyl."

She started to tell him again to shut up and go to sleep, but didn't. Let him talk. She wouldn't even hear him.

"Why do you do things like that, Scyl? Honest to God, I just don't understand you. I guess I never have. How can you get yourself so worked up and me so worked up and then stop just like that? It's not natural, Scyl. Just not natural."

She remained silent.

"You do the craziest things sometimes, Scyl. Sometimes I think maybe you are crazy – crazy in a way, I mean."

She didn't answer him.

"All these years, and I don't know you any better than I did the first time. I never know where I am with you, Scyl. You can be the sweetest woman God ever put breath in. And you can be the damndest devil who ever got out of hell. Why is that, Scyl?"

She inhaled the smoke deeply and blew it far out into the room.

He turned over then. He sighed, and she felt him trying to relax. Then suddenly he sat up and twisted toward her.

"Scyl, you're not still thinking about that divorce? Not really, you're not?"

She blew another puff of smoke into the room.

"That's not why you wanted to stop, is it, Scyl?"

She started to speak, to tell him again that she had to have a divorce — and on her terms — but he went on talking, and she could feel rather than see the firmness of his jaw.

"No, that's not it, I know, Scyl. Besides, you never really meant that about a divorce. You couldn't mean it. Not after all these years and everything. You just couldn't mean it like you said."

There was no use telling him again. She was certain that he would never understand. He had a strange, stubborn streak in him which even she could not always penetrate. She had told him too many times already. She was tired of telling him. She had given him chance after chance to change his mind, and he hadn't changed it. He would never change it. There was only one way left, and that was her own way.

He mistook her silence. "You're a funny one, Scyl." He lay down again and let his bony frame stretch its full length. "Guess a man can never understand a woman. But God knows I'd like to understand you."

She lit another cigarette. After a while his breathing became regular and deep. Then he was snoring again. She mashed out her fourth cigarette, drew the sheet up over her naked body, then turned and looked at him for a moment.

Her eyes glared in the darkness. Then they became slits. "No, Milt," she said aloud. "I'm not even thinking about the divorce. Not any more. I have another plan. You wouldn't understand it, either."

CHAPTER II

Scylla Zubitch arrived in Los Angeles in 1938. A man named Peterson — Samuel J. Peterson — picked her up just outside El Paso, Texas, on Highway U.S. 80, the Broadway of America, on Memorial Day. There were at least fifty hitchhikers strung along the first quarter of a mile, looking for a ride. Nearly half of them were women, some with children and two with swollen bellies getting ready to deliver other children.

One of the pregnant women, a young kid in a dirty dress,

with her helpless man, and a gum-chewing blonde were standing near where Scylla waited. All of them rushed forward when Peterson slowed down his bright red Cadillac convertible. Scylla started, then stopped. She would not compete with the mob.

Maybe it was because she stood aloof that Peterson brushed the others aside and nodded toward her. Maybe it was because he didn't like pregnant women. Maybe he didn't like blondes. Or maybe it was because there was something about Scylla's tall, straight figure that he liked. She never cared why it was that Peterson called, "Come on, baby, I'll take you."

She didn't like the cocky tone of his voice. But she did like the looks of his automobile and the flashy diamond she saw sparkle in the sunlight as his hand waved her toward the car.

She slid onto the leather upholstery, so hot from the sun that it burned her bottom. At the same time she looked him over. He smiled at her, reached partially across her to the glove compartment, and took out a fresh cigar. He pressed the lighter on the dashboard and carefully bit off the end of the cigar while he waited for the lighter to pop out. She had the feeling that he was giving her plenty of time to look him over, and she knew that he was sizing her up out of the corner of his eye.

He was forty-five, she guessed, just two and a half times her eighteen. There was graying hair around the edge of the cap he wore, and she was sure there was no hair beneath it. He had a round, flabby face in which the red veins could be seen. His salt-and-pepper tweed coat didn't hide his potbelly. Even sitting in the car, she was looking down at him, and she knew he was at least three inches shorter than she was.

He puffed at the cigar until he was satisfied with it, then stuck the lighter back in the dashboard.

"No bag?" he asked as he faced her and made a frank appraisal of her luscious breasts beneath the thin material of her flowered-print dress.

"Just this." She indicated the worn handbag in her lap as his eyes traveled down. He didn't notice the bag. Instead he was judging the soft curve of her thigh, the bare knees between the short hemline of her dress and the rolled top of her stockings. She knew he liked what he saw, and she decided then that the rest of her journey to Los Angeles was going to be paid for by Samuel J. Peterson.

He stepped on the gas, and the car rolled onto the highway and began picking up speed.

"Going far?"

"All the way."

"L.A.?"

"Yes."

"Not Hollywood?"

"They're the same, aren't they?"

He slowed behind a truck, then swung around it with a burst of speed. "Well, they are, really. But people going out to get into the movies never say they're going to L.A. They always say Hollywood."

"I'm not going out to get into the movies."

He slowed for a curve. "Why not?"

"Never thought of it."

"You'd do all right." He made the turn and picked up speed again.

"You're connected with the movies?"

"Now how'd you know that, baby? I knew you were a smart girl the moment I saw you back there. And you know, baby, another thing I knew then — right then when I saw you standing there in the road — know what it was?"

"What?"

"I said it to myself right then. Just like that I knew it." He let one hand loose from the steering wheel and snapped his fingers. "I said, 'There's a baby that the movies could use.' That's what I said right there to myself. What do you think of that?"

When she had climbed into the car and when he'd first begun to talk, she'd been sure that he was making a play. They all did, and she didn't care. But there was something new in his voice which made her feel that he was telling her the truth. In a brilliant flash she saw herself with clothes, furs, diamonds, a winding staircase, a swimming pool, automobiles. And she was excited.

As the panorama swept before her eyes, his hand left the steering wheel and reached across and patted her leg. "Yes, sir, baby, that's just what I thought."

In that instant the brilliant picture exploded, and her excitement vanished. She was again Scylla Zubitch with all her worldly possessions in the bag on her lap — a dress rolled in a tight wad, in need of mending, a lipstick which was almost gone, a compact which was almost empty of powder, a comb with half the teeth missing, a dollar bill, one quarter, one dime and two nickels, and a handkerchief she had made

from the remains of her slip. She was just Scylla Zubitch, a girl with a beautiful body and nothing else of value, and this man patting her leg was just another man who wanted the only thing she had to offer anyone.

There was bitterness in her voice when she said, "I'll bet that's what you said."

His hand went back to the steering wheel. "Why don't you believe me, baby? Look, I'm not handing you a line. Not Sammy Peterson. I don't hand out lines like that, baby."

"I'll bet," she repeated.

"I'm telling you, baby, I don't. I don't have to hand out lines, baby. In my position I can have lots of girls, any dame I want. We fellows in pictures have our pick of the crop. So why would I want to hand you a line, give you a buildup, if I didn't really mean it?"

She was half-convinced, and she was half-sorry that she had misjudged him. "You can't blame me for thinking . . ."

"Forget it, baby. Sure, I see how you'd think that. Women are funny. If you make a pass at them, they say they don't like it. If you give it to them straight, they still think you're making a pass at them."

"I'm sorry," she said, and she almost meant it. However, she meant that she was sorry that he wasn't making a pass at her. For she thought this man could be of some use to her. She didn't want to miss any opportunities, not with a dollar forty-five cents left. But this man had her confused. If he had been making a pass, she would have known how to handle him and how to make him pay for his fun. But if he was really leading up to making a genuine offer, she didn't know how she was going to handle it. She had had no experience in handling genuine offers.

He went around two cars at once and cut back to the right side of the road just in time to miss an oncoming car. Her breath caught in her throat, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Not me, baby. I'm the direct type. You know what I mean. I don't beat around the bush, so to speak. If I think you got something we can use in my business, I say that. And I mean it. If I think you got something I can use in bed, I say that, too. Just the same frank way."

She noticed that the speedometer needle was pointing to seventy. The noise of the wind made it difficult for her to hear him, and she moved closer because she wanted to hear him.

"Now I'm not saying, baby, that you haven't got something that would interest me in bed. You've got that, but

something else, too, maybe. It's business that I'm thinking about right now, mostly business, anyway. You got looks, a figure, and your voice is deep and what I'd say was sexy, too. Now that's something we need in pictures. Lots of good-looking girls have the figure and everything, but they don't have the voice to go with it. Talk some more to me, baby — I'd like to get a good idea of your voice."

"Talk? What do you want me to talk about?"

"Anything. Tell me your name, all about yourself."

"There isn't anything about me to tell," she said slowly. "My name is Scylla Zubitch."

He cringed when she said Zubitch. "Zubitch! God damn! Well, we could change that easy enough. Ninety-nine per cent of the names are changed for pictures, anyway. You know that?"

"I've heard it," she said.

"But Scylla. Now I like that. You spell it with a y, don't you?"

"S-c-y-l-l-a," she spelled it.

"That's good. Spell it funny-like, but it pronounces easy. Sil-a. That's easy to say and easy to remember."

He was silent then. She didn't try to talk. They were approaching Las Cruces, and he began slowing down. Neither of them spoke until after they'd gone through the town and U. S. 80 stretched out before them in a long, straight line of concrete.

Then suddenly he struck the steering wheel with his fist. "Now I know. Been trying to figure out that damned name of yours. Knew I'd read about it before. Now I remember it. My brain's like that, baby. Just nothing there, and then all at once I've got it."

"I don't understand."

"Scylla," he said. "Scylla. Homer wrote about her. She was some sort of Greek goddess, or something."

Scylla Zubitch had never heard of Scylla, the Greek goddess.

"The only thing is that that Scylla was a . . ." He stopped, then after a moment went on. "But what the hell, baby, nobody knows about that. We'll just call you a Greek goddess. Matter of fact, we could call you a Greek, a real Greek. You got a sort of dark skin, haven't you, or is that sunburn?"

A new excitement was churning through her now. She wanted to tell him that she did have Greek ancestry far back in her family line. But she didn't because she had closed that part of her life forever. She didn't want to explain it.

"I do have a dark complexion," she said, "and I have a sunburn, too."

He swung the car around a Model T Ford with a mattress lashed to the top and what seemed to be a dozen people in it. The Cadillac went around it easily, but then the motor sputtered.

"Now what the hell!" he said. "We're not going to have trouble, I hope. Out here on this god-forsaken desert!"

He pressed down on the accelerator again, and again the motor sputtered. He cursed it again. "Paid them two hundred dollars just to check this thing over before I left New York," he said. "Just to make sure I could have a nice trip across. Nice trip with no trouble. Now the damned thing's acting up."

The car seemed to operate all right at the slower speeds, missing only when he tried to go faster. Scylla thought they were going fast enough. But she silently cursed the car, too, for now he seemed to have forgotten all about her. His only interest was in cursing the car and cursing the mechanics to whom he had paid two hundred dollars.

They reached Lordsburg, and he turned into the first garage. He jerked a fresh cigar out of the glove compartment before he got out and began telling the mechanic how the car had acted.

"Sounds like the carburetor to me," the mechanic said. "Up higher now, you know. And with different gasolines."

"Well, don't explain it to me," he said impatiently. "Fix it."

She sat silently in the car while he paced back and forth as the mechanic buried his head and shoulders under the hood. She could see now that he was as short as she had thought. He wouldn't come much above her chin.

The mechanic came out from under the hood. "Carburetor's all right," he said. "Best to yank her off and clean her out."

"How long will that take?"

"Half-hour. Not more'n that."

"Well, do it," Peterson ordered.

While they waited, Peterson took her into a café, and they ate. Rather, she ate; he was still too angry to do more than eat a few bites of a sandwich and gulp down a cup of coffee.

"What I need is a drink," he said. "I've got some stuff, but I never drink when I'm driving. Too damned dangerous on these highways."

She was too busy eating to make conversation. It was the first good meal she had had since she had spent the night with the cotton-gin salesman in Sweetwater, Texas.

When they started out again, he kept cursing the New York mechanics. "When I pay for a thing, that's what I expect to get. I paid them plenty. Knew they were holding me up, but I wanted to be sure I had no trouble. And what do I get — crap, that's what I get. Just crap."

After a while he stopped cursing and remained silent, his eyes on the road ahead. She kept waiting for him to renew the conversation about her chances in pictures, but he seemed to have forgotten it.

She decided that the way to get him back to talking about her was to give him something to talk about. She wasn't sure just how bold she should be with this man. She had known how to get the cotton-gin salesman interested in her, as she had always known how to get any man interested in her. But somehow this man had her puzzled.

However, she decided that she had to give this man at least an excuse to start. She turned sideways in the seat, leaning against the door on her side. She brought her left knee up on the seat and hooked her right leg over her left foot. This brought her short dress well up over her bare knees, pulled it tight on the outside of each thigh, and exposed part of the inner thigh.

He didn't even notice her for a while. Then he turned and half smiled at her. His eyes left the road and went along her legs.

He reached over and patted her and said, "You really got the gams, baby."

She thought he was interested then, but that was all he had to say. Whether he was not interested or whether the twisting winding road, as they got deeper into the mountain, took all of his attention, she could not be sure. She finally faced the windshield again and drew her dress as far down as it would go over her knees.

As they pulled into Douglas, Arizona, he turned to her and said, "Think we'd better quit for the day. What do you say, baby?"

She wondered whether he was really tired or whether he was just anxious to sleep with her. And she also considered that he might be making an excuse to stop to get rid of her. She was still puzzled about why he had not been more interested in her legs.

"Whatever you like," she said, and she hated herself for having to allow him to make the choice. But she knew she could not take the chance of losing him.

"Hotel or motel, baby?" he said as he halted for a traffic light. "Which do you prefer, baby?"

She wished he would stop that infernal calling her "baby." But again she had to say, "Whatever you like."

It did not matter to her so long as there was a bath. Cleanliness was a fetish with Scylla Zubitch, and the problem of keeping clean, now that she was reduced to one extra dress and a dollar-forty-five in cash, was worrying her. She had not had a bath since Sweetwater. At this moment she would have been willing to go anywhere with anyone if she could have a bath and a chance to wash out her one slip, one brassière, and one pair of panties.

"Hotel it'll be," he said.

She was sure then that all he wanted was to sleep with her. But she was surprised when he registered them at the Palace Hotel in separate rooms. She was standing near enough to the desk to see him when he signed "Scylla" with a flourish, making the S a long, curving letter. He hesitated before writing the next name, and she thought that he was wondering how to spell Zubitch. She was about to tell him when he brought the pen around in another flourish and wrote "Anderson," looping the A in a big circle.

The clerk wrote 416 after his name and 417 after hers. Upstairs the bellboy stopped at 417 first, then turned to ask which bags were hers. It struck her as funny that she had no bags and Peterson had four. She wondered how the bellboy would figure that one out. But Peterson pointed to two of the bags and said, "The black ones. The others in my room."

She did not wait to see how long it would take Peterson to come into 417. Regardless of how anxious he might be, she had to bathe first, anyway. She stripped off her clothing, ran water in the tub, and put her slip, brassière, and panties in to soak. She examined her dress. It was fairly clean except for dirt around the collar. She pushed it into the water, too. She'd stretch it while it was wet and let it dry without wrinkles.

Then she turned on the water in the shower and began to scrub herself.

She washed her reddish-brown hair, too, while she had the chance. She had naturally wavy hair. All she had to do was to pat it into place and let it dry.

She was sitting at the dressing table, combing and patting her hair into place, when the connecting door between the two rooms opened. She saw him in the mirror. Freshly

shaved and bathed, he wore fresh trousers, a fresh white shirt with the collar open. Everything about him was fresh, even his smile around the fresh long cigar. He reminded her of a piece of wilted lettuce which has been freshened in the icebox.

She smiled at him, and then she watched him as he stood grinning and seeing her. He could see the long line of her beautifully arched back. In the mirror he could see her sparkling reddish-brown hair, her firm, chiseled face with its dark brown, almost black eyes, its slender nose, its firm mouth, its high cheekbones and tapered chin. He could see the sweep of her soft neck, and the delicious roundness of her pointed breasts, and the smooth flatness of her stomach disappearing beneath the edge of the dressing table.

"Baby!" he said, and walked slowly toward her. "I knew Sammy Peterson was right. You've got it. Everything, baby!" She half-turned on the stool.

"Stand up, baby — let me have all of it."

She drew her legs around, faced him, and stood up. She tried to be graceful, but a grace of movement was not one of her qualities. She was afraid she would be awkward, and the fear caused her muscles to tense, which destroyed a part of her beauty.

"Relax, baby," he said. "Just relax."

She had never had an experience like this before. She had never before stood naked before a man while he examined her only for beauty. There was no lust, only frank admiration in his eyes as he walked partly around her, viewing each detail, chewing his long cigar. "Turn around, baby," he said, and made a little circle with the cigar in his hand. "All the way around, baby."

She turned around to the right and then at his motion turned around to the left.

"Greek goddess," he said. "Just like I thought. You've got it, baby."

She kept expecting him to come closer. She wanted him to come closer and touch her, for then she would know how to handle him. But he kept his distance, and anger began to stir inside her. What kind of man was this? Who did he think he was that he could command her?

"Okay, baby," he said. "Get your clothes on. We'll go have something to eat. I'm hungry as a bear."

She involuntarily turned around to obey him, and then she realized that she didn't have any clothing. "They're in the tub," she said.

"Oh," he said. "I get it. Well, you need some new ones, anyway, baby. I'll go get some things. What do you need? Everything?"

"But . . . but how can you . . ." She didn't understand how this man could go out and buy clothes for her, especially since she was taller, bigger-busted, and longer-legged than the average woman.

"Look, baby, don't you worry about that. I'll fit you." He walked around her again, eying her closely. "A thirty-six brassière with extra-large cups. You're a thirty waist, hips thirty-eight. A size sixteen extra-long will just about do it—slip'll be a thirty-six."

He smiled at her amazement. "Look, baby, how do you think I got the dough to get into the picture business? Twenty years in the garment business. That's how. Don't worry, I'll be back with something that'll do—at least do until we get to Hollywood. And it'll be green, too, baby. You got just enough red in that hair of yours for a light shade of green."

She lay down on the bed while she waited for him to come back. She could not relax. Samuel J. Peterson had her completely confused. One moment she wanted to think he was a fat little toad of a man who was trying to impress her with his importance because he knew inside of himself that he could not impress her any other way. And then next she thought he was something of a miracle that had happened to her just when she needed him most.

Scylla lay straight and still, trying to think it out.

But what kept crowding into her mind were memories, memories as old as she was. Instead of focusing her mind on Peterson, the potbellied little man who had promised her something of Hollywood, memories of her father, a big, blustering man with a booming voice, scowling face, heavy black eyebrows, and an overhanging mustache, blocked out everything else.

Her father had been an enormous man who had towered over her small, fragile blond mother. A man with an incredible drive which even he did not understand. A man of extremes in work or in play, in love or in hate. He could and sometimes did kick a squealing pig into the creek to drown, knock a cow down with his great fists, beat a horse with a singletree, and then roar with laughter at the frightened animals. Still, he would spend a sleepless night when a sow littered, a cow calved, or a mare foaled.

He was the same with Scylla's mother. He would drive her at work in the fields until she dropped, then pick her up in

his arms and carry her across the plowed ground to the house. He would hold her on his lap and feed her like a child or sit all night at her bedside, tending and watching her. In a drunken rage or out of sheer anger he would knock her across the uncovered floor of the kitchen, but would himself crawl across the handmade carpet of the bedroom, begging her for her favors. He would roar, his booming voice spreading across the Ohio farm, one minute, and the next he would weep like a baby seeking its mother's breast.

The day before Christmas when Scylla was six, her father drank wine all day. That evening her mother sent her to bed in the back room early, explaining that Santa Claus could not come while she was awake. Some time during the blackness of the night Scylla was awakened by the roar of her father's voice and the screams of her mother. That was not unusual, but somehow this time seemed to be different. She lay hidden beneath the quilts for what seemed endless hours and heard the voices and the blows. Then everything was deathly quiet and still.

The next day there was a doctor at the house, but her mother died Christmas Night. She never knew what other people thought, but she knew that her father had murdered her mother.

After that there were many women who came to the farm. Some stayed only a night. Others remained for a week, and occasionally one seemed to stay for a long time. Some were young, and some were old. Some were fat, and some were thin. But to Scylla they were all the same. They made her father roar and rage one moment, then cry and beg the next.

Always a big girl for her age, Scylla learned hard work from the beginning. She learned to work hard in the house, to work hard in the barnyard, and to work hard in the fields.

Although her father drove her in terror as he had her mother, he also had his kindnesses toward her. For one thing, he insisted that Scylla get all the schooling possible. "You don't want to be ignorant like your mama," he told her. "I teach you to work. The school makes you smart."

For another thing, he told her that if she proved she was the smartest girl in the school, he would give her half the farm the day she graduated. Scylla could never quite believe this promise of generosity in her father, but it held her there in spite of the hard work and the brutality.

Scylla graduated from Union High School just before she was seventeen, the youngest in her class, and with the highest honors. That night her father put on a new blue

serge suit. It was the first time he had worn the suit since her mother's funeral.

Scylla almost believed her father that night. From the platform her eyes kept searching the audience for the sight of him. But she never saw him. She had a sickening feeling of desertion.

She was certain that even his one promise was false when in the middle of the night she heard his booming voice, thick with wine, as he returned to the farm. And when she heard his voice become pleading, she knew he had another woman with him.

But it was not the voice of her father which decided Scylla that night. It was something in the voice of the woman, something which told her that this woman knew how to handle her father. Not even his roar and rage changed her, or his threats of blows. And his promises failed to reach her. She was untouched, too, by his begging.

Scylla never actually saw the woman. When her father promised the woman marriage and everything he owned, Scylla knew the woman was taking something which was rightfully hers. Still, she admired the woman. She at last knew there was a woman who could handle her father. And she hated her father all the more.

When she heard them leave the house before dawn to go to the county seat to be married, Scylla knew she had lost her chance to possess the land. But she also realized that she had found something. She had found the certain knowledge that regardless of the man a woman could do what she wanted with him if she made him want her enough. And that was what Scylla would do.

She found nearly a hundred dollars in a dresser drawer in her father's room. There was usually more in the drawer, but she supposed her father had taken it to spend on the new woman. An hour after her father and the woman left, Scylla left, carrying her few belongings in a cardboard box held together with a piece of harness strap.

In the more than a year since that morning and this moment in the Douglas hotel room where she waited for Peterson, a great many things had happened. She had worked at whatever she could get to do, which was not much. She had slept with men wherever she thought it was necessary or possibly promising. Neither the jobs nor the men were important. She was waiting for the time when somewhere she would meet a man who had something and whom she could handle as she wanted.

She was still trying to decide whether Peterson was the man for her purpose or just another man when the door was kicked open and he waddled in behind an armload of packages. She gave a little exclamation of excitement as he dumped them on the bed before she could get off it, some of them falling on her naked body.

But Peterson was frowning with anger. "This god-damned hick burg! Everything for the Mexican peons and the cow-hands' gals, but not a decent place in town with decent women's clothing. I'll write Abe about this. Somebody ought to put up a good store here."

She was already tearing open the packages, the biggest one first. "But . . ." she cried as she saw the pale green dress.

"It'll do, baby. Have to. We haven't got time to look around. Now in Hollywood we'll get . . ."

She was starting to open another package when he stopped her and took it from her hands. "Not that one, baby. Get the other ones."

She wondered for an instant what was in the package, which he tossed into his room. But she forgot it as she found underwear, stockings, pumps, and even a purse to go with the green dress. She even forgot that he was watching as she hurried into the clothing. She didn't even notice when he went back to his own room.

By the time she was dressed, he was back at the open doorway, this time with his tie and coat on. "Not bad, baby. Not bad," he appraised her. "You're a looker in anything. In fact, without anything at all." He grinned at his joke.

Because she had never been one to talk and because he apparently had never been one not to talk, she listened mostly as they ate in the hotel dining room. There was something strangely fascinating about this man, something which made her almost want to like him, in spite of her past experiences and her solemn vows to herself.

After dinner he took her across the border to Nogales. But he was not interested in the bars and their entertainment and became very angry when a man slid onto a stool beside him and suggested he knew where they could see a "private show." He cursed the man, cursed the town, cursed the drinks, and cursed the singers and dancers in the cabarets.

"For the hicks," he said, "all this stuff. Come on, baby, let's go back."

She made no objection. She was willing to do whatever he wanted to do, not because of him but because of what she wanted to get out of him. She was feeling the effects of the six drinks she had had. She had not noticed that the drinks were affecting him until they were back in the hotel in the elevator going up to the fourth floor. He stood very close to her and slid his hand around her waist and tightened his arm.

She looked down into his face. He winked up at her. "You're all right, baby."

She expected him to go further, but he dropped his arm and stood away from her. She expected him to renew the approach when they entered her room, but instead he walked on through the connecting door to his own room. The door half-closed behind him, and she wondered if he had intended to close it completely.

She drew the shades, then carefully removed her new dress and slip. She kicked off the new pumps and carefully rolled down her stockings. Then she remembered her other things still soaking in the tub.

She took soap from the basin and knelt beside the tub and began washing the garments. When they were clean, she carefully rinsed and wrung them out. She hung them neatly on the towel racks. She decided there was no use in stretching the dress since she would have to wad it in the package with the other things, anyway.

She had almost forgotten about him while she worked. Somehow it was a surprise to her to find him sitting in the easy chair in her room when she came out of the bathroom.

"What've you been doing, baby?" he smiled at her. He was wearing broad-striped green-and-white pajamas.

She smiled at him. "My laundry."

He laughed. "Isn't that bra a little tight for you, baby? Looks like it's cutting you."

Involuntarily her hand went to the brassière where it did cut into her flesh. "No, it's fine, really," she said.

"Looks tight to me, baby. Yours are bigger than I thought."

She didn't say anything. She just stood there between the bathroom door and the bed. She didn't know what he expected her to do.

She was beginning to feel awkward when he reached to the floor beside the chair and picked up a package. It was the package he had told her not to open before.

"Here, baby." He held out the package to her without getting up. "Put this on."

She went over to him and took the package. "What is it?" She stepped back over to the bed and broke the string.

Even before she raised the lid of the box, she was sure it was a nightgown. But she did not expect to find such a delicately beautiful one.

"Oh!" she said as she lifted the pale yellow garment from the box and let it fall before her. "Beautiful, beautiful!"

"Hold it close to you, baby," he said. "Goes with your coloring."

Even she could see herself through the thin material. "Doesn't hide much," she laughed. "Might as well be naked with this on."

"You don't understand, baby. It's just right. It's the kind of thing that isn't intended to hide. It's to veil."

"But a veil in bed . . ." She thought he must be a little crazy.

"You don't understand, baby," he said again. "A woman must never be naked. Not with a man around. A naked woman isn't a mystery."

"Mystery?" She didn't understand this sort of talk.

"Sure, baby. Woman is always a mystery to a man."

"But why?"

"I can't answer that, baby. She just is. That's the way she was made, and that's the way a man wants her. Why do you think artists put flimsy veils over their paintings of nude women, why a sculptor chisels a drape over his nude statues? Why do you think they do that, baby?"

She wanted to make a wisecrack, to change the subject, but could not think of what to say. Instead she said, "I don't . . . I don't know." She hated him for talking about something she did not understand. "Censors, I guess."

"No, no, baby. That's not the reason. Art is symbolic, baby. The veil in art is symbolic of the mystery in woman."

She stood there holding the yellow nightgown in front of her while he talked. Finally he paused, and she said the only thing she knew to say, "I'll put it on now."

"Okay, baby," he said.

She reached for the fastening of her brassière. But before she released the garment, he said, "No, no, baby. Turn the light out first."

She didn't understand why he wanted her to turn out the light, but she went over to the wall and pushed the button.

The room seemed very dark for a moment. "Now, baby, raise the shade," he told her. "We've a moon tonight. Maybe it's hitting this window."

She raised the shade, and the bright desert moonlight flooded the room. He made a little sound which told her that he was pleased.

"There in the patch of moonlight, baby," he said. "Stand there and put it on."

She did as he told her, wondering why she did it. Although consciously she could not understand this man, couldn't understand why he wanted her to do things in just a certain way, underneath her conscious self there was something which told her that this was real and beautiful, the most beautiful thing which had ever touched her life.

The nightgown billowed around her and fell into flowing lines along the graceful curves of her body. She knew that even in the moonlight all the details of her body were revealed. She felt suddenly light and airy and wished there were music, for she wanted to dance. Involuntarily she took a step or two and turned around, feeling the lacy material billow out, then fall back and caress her.

"Wonderful, baby, wonderful! You'll learn."

But she didn't know what to do next. Somehow she couldn't grasp the something which was stirring deep inside her, couldn't find a way to express it.

He directed her. "Come here, baby."

She went across the room to him. He seemed little and insignificant crouched in the big chair. She half-expected his hands to reach for her, but he didn't move. She could hear his breathing, and she could feel the pounding of her own heart.

Finally through the sound of his breathing and the sound of her heart she heard him whisper, "You're beautiful, baby, you're beautiful."

She stood waiting, but she wasn't prepared for his next words. "Turn the light on, baby." It was an order. The whole scene, the feeling, everything ended.

Somehow he looked a little different when she turned back from the wall switch, the harsh yellowish light of the ceiling filling the room.

He stuck the cigar back into his mouth. "Look, baby," he said. "I told you I was the direct type. Well, I am. I don't do a buildup just for a roll in the hay. When I want to do a thing like that, I come right out and say so."

"You've been nice to me," she said with sincerity.

"All right, I've been nice to you, baby. So what?" He chewed his cigar. "I spent some money on you, and I'll get

you to Hollywood. But what's that? I did it because I wanted to. Don't owe me nothing, baby."

"I'd like to repay you, at least thank you."

"Well, you can, baby. I didn't see this in the script, but now I've come to it." He removed a piece of tobacco from his lip and put the cigar into the ash tray. He stood up. "I want you, baby." He moved toward her. "Want me, baby?"

She wanted to laugh at the potbellied little man, his face flushed, his mouth loose, who looked more like a comic character in one of his motion pictures than a lover. All day and all evening he had had her confused. Now she was not in the least confused. He had had her lost in his territory; now she had him on her grounds.

She was enjoying her moment of triumph. She stood there looking down at him, seeing his want, feeling his hunger, and knowing that she would never satisfy them except for the moment. But she could let him think he had her. She could fool him. Men were all so easily fooled. They thought they conquered a woman, when actually it was the woman who conquered them, who bent them to her will. God damn them all!

He was close to her now, almost touching her with his protruding belly, his hands tensed and nervous, yet not daring to reach. He was afraid of her, and she knew it.

"Baby," he said, desire, hope and fear all rolled together in his voice. Desire for her, hope that she would consent, and fear that she would refuse.

"You're taking me to Hollywood?" It was a demand, a frank condition of a bargain.

"Sure, baby, anywhere," he promised.

Her eyes were half-closed as she looked down at him. She moved ever so slightly, and his potbelly touched her. She could feel the heat of him. Then his hands were on her.

She stepped back, twisted away from him. With a coolness far beyond her eighteen years, with the deliberateness of a fully experienced woman, she crossed her arms as she reached for the hem of the sheer nightgown.

Well out of his reach, she carefully lifted the nightgown from her body, being careful not to damage or soil it. For a second she faced him, seeing and enjoying the horrible tenseness in him. Let him suffer! Then she turned around, ran her hand through the nightgown, and turned it right side out again. She knew he was bursting with desire, and she took her time as she let the garment fall into folds and then carefully doubled it and laid it on the bureau.

She turned back, facing him. Unable to restrain himself, he stepped toward her, but she knocked his hands aside. "The lights," she said. "Turn them out."

It was Samuel J. Peterson, former garment manufacturer and now motion picture tycoon, who took his orders from the eighteen-year-old woman he had picked up hitch-hiking. She wanted the light turned off because she did not want to be able to see him, for she was afraid that she would laugh in his face. And she did not want to laugh at him, at least not to his face, for she knew that he could be very useful to her.

She lay back on the bed as he hurried back to her. She let him fall on top of her. Then she helped him out of his ridiculous striped pajamas. But, she thought, the pajamas were no more ridiculous than his flabby, hot body.

She knew Samuel J. Peterson thought he was conquering her, that he was the aggressive male mastering the receptive female. He thought she was lost in the whirling sea of passion into which he plunged her. But she knew that the responses he thought were real were only practiced movements from a knowledge which was born in her muscles. She knew that Samuel J. Peterson was nowhere near reaching her, let alone conquering her.

As he labored over her, she was thinking of all the things he could give her, all the things she would make him give her. If she played her hand right, she could have practically anything she wanted. For, she was certain, Samuel J. Peterson would always want to be doing what he was doing now.

CHAPTER III

They spent the next night in Phoenix, where Peterson bought her another dress, more underwear, a hat, and a genuine leather suitcase in which to put them. He again complained long and loud about the selection of goods available in the stores.

He expected to make Hollywood the next day, but the desert sun was unusually angry and beat down upon the cloth top of the car, searing them with its heat. Even the giant cactus, the Joshua trees, and the mesquite bushes seemed to wilt. Scylla saw Peterson's face grow redder and redder and knew that her own grew darker and darker. The

car ran hot, and he had to drive more slowly than he liked to keep it from boiling.

They stopped several times at desert stations to get water for the car and something cool for their own parched mouths. When they stopped in Banning for a date shake, Peterson said, "I've had enough, baby. Let's find a place and rest."

It was the middle of the next afternoon before they reached Hollywood. Samuel J. Peterson drove along Hollywood Boulevard, shoving his lighted cigar first to one side and then to the other, indicating points of interest. She was puzzled when he drove on through the Hollywood section. He saw her look and laughed.

"Hollywood's no place to live, baby. Place to make money, but not live. The beach is much nicer."

He stopped at a hotel on Breeze Avenue in Venice within a few feet of the beach. "Think you'll like this, baby?"

She did not reply, for to her there was no point in discussing places to stay at this time, although she was glad they were near the sea. She had to accept whatever he offered, at least until she was in a better position to deal with him. That was her only concern now — finding out when and how much she could get out of him.

She did not notice until they were in the room that he had the porter bring up only her bag and one of his.

"Your other things?" she asked.

"In the car, baby. No use bringing them up. We'll only be here tonight."

"Tomorrow?"

"Business, baby, and lots of it. Must be a hundred people waiting to see me." He lighted a new cigar and puffed at it. "May not be able to see you for a few days, baby."

Panic seized her. He was getting ready to run out on her. The panic turned to anger, and she said, "You haven't meant what you've been telling me."

He walked over to her quickly, put his hands on her arms. "Now there, baby, don't you worry. Samuel J. Peterson will take care of you. Come on, give me a little kiss."

His face did not reach up to hers, and she did not turn hers down for his kiss. She stood rigid. "I don't believe you."

He tugged at her, trying to pull her down. "Baby! How can you say that?"

"I don't believe you," she repeated.

Suddenly he dropped his hands from her arms, stepped back, and bit into his cigar. For the first time she saw anger in his sun-red face.

"Baby, you don't act like that with me. No one does, see? Who do you think you are? You're not a movie star yet. You can't be a bitch with me, see?"

Another kind of panic seized her. She had misjudged him again. She had made him angry. He wasn't as mad about her as she had thought. He wasn't as flabby in his manner as he was in his body. His manner was tough, hard, and demanding.

"Why do you think I've been nice to you, baby?" he went on, shaking the cigar at her. "Just to get a little from you? Look, baby, I told you in the beginning I could have all of that stuff I wanted — and have it without fighting for it. You got something, baby, and it's nice. Damned nice. But you haven't got a corner on it, baby. There's plenty of it on the market these days. Most of it damned cheap — in price and in quality, too."

He came so close to her that she could feel his potbelly touching her, and he shook the cigar in her face. "I might make something out of you, baby. I mean that. But it'll take a lot of doing. You got the stuff — the natural stuff — but you haven't got the wrapping. I can do things for you, baby. I can get you places no one else can. But I say to hell with you if you don't want to follow me."

There was something fearful and menacing about him. He was the first man who had ever beaten her with words. Some had beaten her with their fists, and others had lashed at her with curses, but not one of them had ever really won over her. Yet this man, this little potbellied man with the long cigar, was winning over her, making her feel ashamed, making her feel helpless before him.

And she found herself both hating him and loving him. She wanted to drop at his feet and cry out that she was sorry, that she would do anything he wanted her to do. But she could not quite bring herself to loosen this feeling in her.

"I'm sorry," she made herself say. "I didn't mean to . . ."

He put the cigar back in his mouth and grinned with satisfaction. "Now you're talking the right way, baby."

She leaned over, letting her body press closer to him. "I . . . I . . ."

"You don't have to apologize, baby." He put his hands on her arms again. "Just remember, that's all."

She took the cigar out of his mouth, laid it in the ash tray, then bent to kiss his mouth.

"Okay, baby," he said.

She reached for the buttons of her dress, the yellow dress

he had bought for her in Phoenix. He picked up his cigar again. "Later, baby," he said. "Not now. Let's clean up and get something to eat first."

While she used the bathroom, he made several telephone calls. He was still talking on the phone when she came out. She heard him say, "That hot, is it? That's fine." And after a pause, "You call me here if you just have to. Otherwise — well, you know. We'll make it tomorrow. So long, Maxie."

He turned to her. "Hot deal cooking, baby. But we can't let that interfere with something to eat." He began removing his clothes. "Won't be long, baby. Once over lightly."

During their sea-food dinner on the amusement pier he said, "Baby, you dance or sing at all?"

"I could learn," she said.

"Bet you could at that, baby." He sucked at a lobster leg, then wiped his chubby fingers. "Maybe you got enough of other things so singing and dancing won't mean anything." He winked. "We'll see, baby."

Back in the hotel room, he was anxious to get into the big double bed. She tried to be submissive, but found that she could only be permissive. She wanted to forget the cold bitterness of her being, but she couldn't. She thought she was making a good pretense, but he saw through it.

"Come on, baby," he demanded. "Let yourself go."

She made an honest effort then to let herself go. For a time she thought she had. And she thought he was satisfied, for he didn't say anything more. But in the end she knew she hadn't. She was glad, for somehow she hated the vanity of this man.

He lay smoking a fresh cigar afterward, and there was a strange quiet about him. She did not mind his not talking, but there was something in the stillness which she did not understand. Once she rolled over closer to him, letting her thigh touch him. If he noticed, he gave no indication. It made her angry. She rolled back to her side of the bed. "Smoke your damned cigar," she said to herself, and wished she could say it out loud.

The telephone rang. He popped out of bed and answered it.

"Yes," he said. And then, "Yes," again.

He listened then for several seconds. "Okay, I'll be there."

He was stuffing his things back into his bag and pulling on his clothes before she fully realized what was happening. She started to get up, but he said, "Stay there, baby. No

use your getting up. Something's just come up. That deal's hotter than I thought."

She lay with her elbows supporting the upper part of her body, her great breasts jutting out toward him, and watched him, feeling a strange fear. Within five minutes he was ready. He came over and kissed her. "Take it easy, baby."

"When will you . . ."

"Maybe a couple of days, baby." He took some bills from his wallet and dropped them on the dresser.

Scylla was afraid, but the sight of the bills made her forget her fears. Before he got out of the door, she was at the dresser. There were three twenties and a five. It was the most money she had held in her hand since the morning she'd left the Ohio farm.

It took three days for Scylla to recognize her fears as being right. Samuel J. Peterson was not coming back. The temporary dreams of winding stairs and swimming pools were foolish. She did not hate Peterson then, but she did despise herself for having half-believed him and for not having been strong enough to handle him.

She had spent twenty dollars of the money for the hotel bill, food, and some additional clothing. She had to conserve the remainder. She searched first for a room and paid three dollars in advance for a week's rent of a converted garage room. Then she went searching for a job.

Jobs in Los Angeles were even scarcer than they were in the East. Los Angeles seemed filled with people looking for work. Men with long experience in a trade or a profession could not find work. Scylla, with no special experience other than farm work, found it almost impossible.

She got temporary jobs, most of them accompanied by a proposition. She worked in cafés. An evening or a day or two. She worked a whole week as a cleaning woman in an apartment house while the regular cleaning woman was ill, but she had to spend two of the nights with the office manager. She walked a thousand miles delivering circulars house to house for an advertising concern. She acted as lure for a wheel-of-fortune game on the amusement pier for three nights. But the barker was more lured than anyone else, and she could not stand him.

She read every want ad and answered hundreds of them, but usually she did not have enough experience or else she was too late. She registered at all the employment agencies. She told everyone she met that she needed work. She kept

going somehow, but her clothes got shabbier and her meals were often far apart.

There were times when Scylla almost regretted leaving the Ohio farm. And many times when she rebuked herself for having missed knowing how to handle Peterson.

The Sunday before Labor Day Scylla's room rent was due again, and she did not have the three dollars. She knew she would have to leave the next day unless something happened immediately. She was out all that evening, hoping against hope that something would happen. But nothing did, and near midnight she walked wearily back to the room.

As she fumbled in her purse for the key, she saw a piece of paper tucked between the door and the jamb. She pulled it out and unfolded it. There was a five-dollar bill inside, and a hastily scrawled note. She had to wait until she got inside and turned on the light to read it.

Sorry to miss you. If you want a job, see Milton Parson, 9210 Willowbrook. Needs a housekeeper.

It was signed by some looping marks for initials which she could not make out.

She didn't puzzle over the initials, for they did not matter. Probably some man who had slept with her and figured he owed her the money. There were several who, in her opinion, owed her more than five dollars. But she did wonder who Milton Parson was. Why did he need a housekeeper? Where was the address? How did she get there? She would have liked to have gone right then.

At dawn Scylla was up. She carefully wrapped her few clothes in a copy of the *Daily News*. The fine leather suitcase Peterson had given her had been pawned the week before. She straightened up the room, stuck the key in the lock, and went out across the beach to find someone who could tell her how to get to the Willowbrook address.

There was an elderly man sitting on a beach bench. She asked him about the address.

"East side," he said. "Take the red car to Sixth and Main. That's downtown, the P.E. Station. Then catch the Watts or Long Beach car from there. It goes right down Willowbrook."

"Is it very far?" She thought that she would walk if it was not too far.

- "Too fur to walk, girlie."

"But how far?"

"Must be twenty miles. Maybe more."

"Thanks," she said, and started off.

"You ain't aiming to walk it, are you?"

She did not reply. She was already hurrying to Ocean Street and the first red car stop.

It took Scylla longer to make the trip than she had expected. She just missed one car out of Sixth and Main and had to wait more than half an hour. She ate bacon and eggs for breakfast in the café below the station while she waited.

She had to walk nearly two blocks after she got off the streetcar. The area was only partially built up. There was nothing near 9210. It was a small frame house which needed painting, sitting on the front of a large lot. Behind it she saw two unpainted sheds and rows of rabbit hutches. The blinds were drawn in the windows, and one was torn. The front door was closed, and the screen door was latched.

There was no bell. She knocked on the screen door. She waited, then knocked again. She could hear no one in the house. She knocked the third time as panic seized her. Maybe this was all someone's idea of a good joke.

"Somebody's got to be here," she said aloud.

There was still no answer to her knocks. She left her bundle on the front porch and walked around the house toward the rear. It was then that she saw the man coming out of one of the sheds.

He was a tall, lean man, not more than twenty-five, she guessed. He wore a bloody apron, and there was a bloody knife in his hand. He saw her at the same time she saw him, and for a moment he stared at her. A friendly smile started across his face, and she was sure he liked her looks.

"You need a housekeeper?" she smiled back at him.

"Why, yes, I do," he nodded, coming toward her.

"That's what I came about."

"You did?" he said, and seemed surprised.

"Yes," she said. "You do need one?"

"Sure." Suddenly he seemed embarrassed by the bloody knife and apron. "Wait'll I get rid of these. We'll talk about it."

He disappeared into the shed, leaving her standing in the driveway. In a moment he came out again. He wore khaki trousers and shirt.

"Been killing some rabbits," he explained. "Now if you'll come this way." He indicated the door of the rear porch. "You'll have to excuse how things look. Guess a man can never keep house like a woman, and I haven't had a woman for about three months."

She wondered what that meant, but did not ask. She followed him through the kitchen, which made her shudder as she saw the mess of it, and into the living room, which was little better.

He raised the front window shade to let in light and indicated the couch. "Just sit there." He took an easy chair across from her.

The room was small, dirty, and disorderly. However, Scylla saw that it was comfortably furnished, including a new console radio.

"What I want," he began, "is someone to come in every day and clean the house and fix my meals. The house, as you can see, hasn't had much done to it since the other woman left. Takes all my time nearly with the rabbits. Now it's not a very big place and wouldn't take all your time. When there's nothing special to do in the house, I'd like help with the butchering and other things with the rabbits."

She was studying him as he spoke. There was a plainness and simpleness about him which she liked. "I could do that," she said.

"I get up before daylight," he said as a sort of warning. "Some people don't like to get up early."

"I've lived on a farm," she said.

His face brightened. "You did? Where?"

She did not want to tell him about herself. "East," she said. "I'll get up as early as you want."

"Say, I think you really want this job."

"I do."

"When can you start?"

"Right now. I'm ready."

"Now? Today?"

"Why not?"

"Well, by golly, that's the kind of person I need around here, one who's not afraid of work." She knew then by the tone of his voice that the job was hers, and she also knew then that he would be the type of man she could handle.

She stood up. "I can start now."

He stood up, too. "But you haven't asked me about the pay. How much do you expect?"

She smiled directly at him. "I'm sure you're the kind of man who'd be fair."

She saw how much that pleased him. "Well, of course, I want to be fair. But I really don't know what's fair. What do you think?"

"Whatever you say," she said. She did not want to frighten

him by saying an amount he might not think correct. Besides, she was then beginning to think that the pay didn't really matter since she was sure she could get whatever she wanted out of him, and that was more than any amount usually paid to a housekeeper.

"Well, since I don't know and you don't know," he said, "why not try it for a few days, and then we'll decide on the amount?"

"I'll be glad to prove to you I can do the work," she said.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," he apologized quickly. "No doubt you can please me." She noted that there was something more in the meaning of the statement than in pleasing him in work.

A cuckoo clock on the wall began to cuckoo. He jerked around. "Golly, I'm late! I've got to get those rabbits butchered. Well, you start right in wherever you want to. Just like it was your own place."

He started out through the kitchen, then suddenly turned back. "Say, this is kind of silly, but I didn't even ask your name. I'm Milt Parson."

"I'm Scylla," she said. She was about to add Zubitch, but she remembered how Peterson had reacted to the name, and she remembered that he had always registered her as Anderson. So she said, "Scylla Anderson."

His eyes were running over her full figure as he repeated the name. "Scylla Anderson. Say, you're a tall girl, aren't you?"

"Five-ten," she smiled. "I'm sure I'll please you."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I'm sure." She stood there letting him look at her and enjoyed his embarrassment as he turned around and almost ran out.

The sight of the dirty dishes, the greasy stove, the grimy sink, the blackened pots and pans, and the general uncleanness of the kitchen made Scylla half-ill. She was working on it when she heard a telephone ring, then heard Milt answering it from an extension in the shed. He came to the back door and called to her through the screen. He said he had just received a call and had to leave right then. It was something about a new customer for his rabbits.

"Might not get back until late this afternoon. Make yourself at home. I like dinner around five."

She had dinner almost ready when she heard him drive into the driveway shortly before five. Promptly at five she called him. He came through the back door, and his eyes widened when he saw the table.

She had not had time to do all the things she wanted to do in the kitchen, but she had cleaned the table and washed and ironed a cloth for it.

"Well, I'll be!" he exclaimed.

She had found part of a ham in the refrigerator and had fried slices from it. She had discovered three good potatoes which she fried. There was no bread in the house, so she had made biscuits. She had looked for something to make a salad with, but all she could find were two cucumbers. She had sliced them and made a sour-cream dressing from half a bottle of cream which had been left out of the refrigerator.

"Where did all this come from?"

She was flicking the hot biscuits out of the pan. "Found it here," she said. "Not much, but best I could do for the time being."

"Looks like a banquet to me," he said as he sat down. "You really know how to put things together. I haven't seen this much food in one meal in I don't know when."

He ate heartily. She ate heartily, too, for it was more food than she had been used to seeing at one meal for some weeks. Neither of them said much. But after his third cup of coffee he wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve and patted his stomach.

"Scylla, you can cook for me every day of the year."

She almost said, "I will," meaning she had already decided that she was going to stay around for a while, maybe a very long time. But she was not ready to let him know it. "Thank you," she said instead.

She thought that she would have to break him from using his shirt sleeve for a napkin, because shirts were hard to wash and iron, and to remember not to pat his stomach. But those were things to come later.

The clock in the front room cuckooed the half-hour. He snapped his fingers and said, "I've got to deliver some more rabbits. Missed them with the other call. Hope they're not sore at me."

"Your business must be very good," she said.

"Yeah, getting better all the time." He started out. "You've sure got yourself a job, Scylla. Breakfast at six."

After a few minutes she heard the truck backing out of the driveway.

She remembered then her bundle of clothing still on the front porch. She went out and got it. For the first time she went into the hallway off the living room. It was then that she saw there was only one bedroom, with a double bed. She had not expected this somehow, and for a moment she

was puzzled. Just how and where was she going to sleep?

Scylla would have been willing to start immediately sleeping with Milt, for she was practically certain then she was going to use him. But her instincts told her that such a suggestion might shock him. She could not let him think she was bold. She would have to wait until it seemed to happen.

She dropped her bundle on a chair in the bedroom and walked thoughtfully back into the living room, trying to decide just how to handle this situation. She walked on into the kitchen and automatically began picking up the dirty dishes and carrying them to the sink.

She had finished the dishes and was scrubbing the sink when she heard him return. She still had not decided what to do about the sleeping arrangements. He came in with a questioning look on his face.

"What in the world you doing, girl?"

"Cleaning this filthy sink," she said. "I'll have to scrub it a hundred times to make it come white again."

"Looks almost new to me now. Look here, you can't work all night."

"Could in this place. And not even get started."

"I know it's a mess. You can't clean it in a night. Why don't you quit?"

She was dusting another layer of scouring powder on the faucets. "Soon as I shine these."

He stood watching her for a moment. He shook his head. "Never saw one like you."

He turned around and went into the living room. In a few minutes she heard him in the bedroom. Then she heard the shower running. When he came back into the kitchen, he was wearing clean clothing and his house slippers.

"You never going to stop?"

"Right now." She squeezed out the dishcloth, then began rinsing it under the tap.

"You better be getting home," he said.

She ignored his statement. "I'll get at those cabinets tomorrow. They look even worse now that the sink is beginning to get half-clean."

"Well, forget about them for now." He was jiggling the keys to his truck. "I've got to make one more trip out. Forgot to pick up some capsules for the rabbits. Want me to take you to the car stop?"

She finished drying her hands slowly. She was not certain of her next move. She didn't turn around. She just said softly, "I'll stay here."

For a moment he did not understand what she meant. "Here?" he said as he began to understand. "You want to stay here tonight?"

"A housekeeper should live where she works," she said, as though all housekeepers took it for granted.

"But look here, you don't have to do that." She knew from his voice that he was beginning to worry.

She turned around then. "I have no other place to go."

"No other place? But . . . well, then, sure . . ."

She saw the flush starting over his lean face. "But look here, I only have one bedroom."

She wanted to laugh at his embarrassment. But she said, "I thought maybe I could sleep on the couch for tonight. Then tomorrow if you'd get me a cot, I could put it on the back porch. That would be fine for now. Later you could glass it in before winter. That is if you're pleased with me and want me to stay."

"Want you . . . pleased with you . . . of course I am. But haven't you any family? Relatives or someone?"

She dropped her head a little. "No one at all. But of course if you don't . . ."

"But I do," he said quickly. "But you can't be sleeping on the porch now. Or the couch. You . . . you take the bedroom. I'll take the couch. Then tomorrow we'll work out something."

"But I wouldn't want to . . ."

"Now don't you worry about it. You just go on and take the bedroom. I've got to get to that drugstore before they close."

Scylla did laugh after he had gone. Everything was going to work out right for her, she felt. She went back into the bedroom and unwrapped her bundle. She hung her one other dress in the closet along with Milt's things. Then she moved his underwear into one of the dresser drawers to make room for her few underthings.

Scylla showered and slipped into her one nightgown, the one Peterson had bought for her. She was tempted to see what effect it would have on Milt right then, but she knew she did not dare. This must be one time when she did not overplay her hand. Besides, she was dead tired. She had hardly stretched out in the bed before she was asleep.

In the next two days Scylla learned almost everything there was to know about Milton Parson and his financial affairs. It was his financial affairs which to her were most

important. He was, in her terms, at least, a moderately wealthy young man.

Milt, who had no family, owned the property on which the house and rabbitry were, and also another plot twice as big to the south of it. He owned the furniture and all his rabbit equipment, as well as his 1937 panel Ford truck. There were one hundred and sixty-two does in the hutches, not counting the litters, and twenty-one bucks. The sale of meats, hides, and manure from these brought him in more than two hundred dollars a month above all expenses. He had lumber ready for building more hutches to add still more does to his string.

With the exception of feed, the expenses were very small. Milt did all the work himself except for occasional day help to sack droppings or do special cleaning. He had several regular hotel, restaurant and market customers, and the demand for rabbit meat was constantly increasing.

All these things Scylla learned from Milt. It was easy to get him to talk, and he seemed to want to impress her, which she admitted to herself he did. From bank books and records Scylla found in the bedroom she learned that he had more than a thousand dollars in his checking account. And he had two savings accounts. There was \$3,021.17 in one, and \$2,412.42 in the other. The interest had not been entered on the second one in more than six months.

In terms of what Samuel J. Peterson might have had, Milt Parson's wealth was small. But what Milt had she could see, touch, and feel. What Peterson possessed she could only guess. In terms of what Peterson might have provided for her, what Milt could give her was tiny. But Peterson had given her promises, and what Milt had looked very real. Winding staircases, furs, jewels, and swimming pools were glamorous, but an unmortgaged house, calico, thick slices of ham, and rabbits making money were very solid. She'd much rather take her chances with the reality of what Milt Parson had than with the promises of Samuel J. Peterson.

Milt slept on the couch for three nights. Scylla watched with interest the obvious confusion and desire mounting in him. She noted that he said nothing more about fixing up the back porch for sleeping and that he took no steps to do anything about it. She knew that his eyes were on her all the time, and she found occasions to bend over low in front of him, to be just a little careless in crossing her legs, and to do other little things which she knew would fan his desires and interest.

By the fourth day Scylla knew she had let things go far enough. She was almost afraid she had let them go too far. Milt was so tense he could not work, and he hardly ate at all. Once when he came to the sink to get a drink while she was washing dishes, he almost brushed against her. She quickly avoided the contact, for she was afraid he would fly to pieces then and there. Somehow it pleased her to see him suffering, but she did not want the situation to get to a point where she could not dominate it.

That evening she went to the bedroom early. She showered and slipped into the nightgown, enjoying the feel of its touch on her skin. Then she took one of his robes from the closet and put it on. She was almost as tall and almost as large as he was, and the robe came near to being a good fit. She tied it loosely with the belt. She knew that now she must be just a little bold. But she also knew that this was all Milt was waiting for.

He was sitting in a chair, nervously flipping the pages of a rabbit supply catalogue. She walked to the hallway door and paused for a moment. He looked up at her, and she saw the want in his eyes. He worked his lips, but no sound came from them.

After a moment, after watching and enjoying his confusion and her power over him, she walked softly over to his chair. A faint smile played around her lips.

"God!" he breathed as she stood close. "God, you're the most beautiful thing in all the world! Enough to drive a man mad."

She knew then that she had completely conquered Milt Parson. He fell out of the chair onto his knees in front of her. His hungry arms clutched around her warm thighs, and he pressed his face against her. She looked down on him and smiled.

"Scylla, Scylla!" he murmured. He turned his face upward, wanting her to lean down and give him her lips. But she did not lean down. Instead she patted his head, ran her fingers through his hair, as she might acknowledge an obedient dog.

"You're nice, Milt."

He sprang to his feet, and his strong arms seized her. She let him have her lips then, let him crush her body to his. But when he crushed too hard, she brought up her hands and pushed him back.

"Wait," she said.

He dropped his arms from her. "I didn't mean to hurt you." She backed away from him, watching the terrible tension

in his face, and slowly released the cord of the robe. His dry mouth let out a tiny gasp as she shrugged her shoulders and let the robe fall to the floor.

"God!" he panted. "God, you're beautiful!"

He made a movement as if to seize her again, but she stopped him with her raised hand. "Wait," she told him.

She backed toward the hallway, holding him, with her eyes. And he followed her, as if magnetically tied to her. At the hall door he grabbed her again. She let him hold her for just an instant, then twisted away.

"No, Milt," she said. She could not let him have his way. Her domination of him had to be complete. She turned and walked into the bedroom. Then she turned back to him. "Your clothes."

He was already tearing off his clothes as she sat back on the edge of the bed. "Fold them," she commanded as he dropped them to the floor. "The chair." She pointed. "Put them there."

When he had done her bidding, she still held him off with a raised hand. She did not want him to tear her one nightgown. Carefully she removed it, got out a hanger, slipped it through the delicate shoulder straps, then put it in the closet.

Finally she lay back on the bed and said, "All right, Milt."

For a fleeting second she wondered if somehow it would be different with this man. And deeper inside her she hoped it would be, wanted it to be. But it wasn't.

And because it wasn't, she hated him all the more.

CHAPTER IV

Milt Parson was not only caught in the trap of her sexuality, but he was deeply in love with her. He showed it in all the little ways a man shows a woman he loves and wants her all the time. This was just as Scylla wanted it to be.

Milt stayed as close to her as he could. He stopped work a dozen times a day to come into the house to try to kiss her, to touch her, or just to stand and watch her. Sometimes he tried to be very masterful about it, but mostly he was just a little boy. When he became too masterful, she cut him down quickly.

As she did the day he came into the kitchen while she was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. He reached

down and pulled her up and against him before she realized what was happening. He crushed her to him, unmindful of the dripping scrubbing brush in her hand, and his lips sought hers.

She turned her face and let him kiss her cheek for just a second. Then she twisted away. "Milt! You're getting me all wet. Besides, you're walking on my clean floor before it's dry. Now stop it!"

"Who's worrying about the old floor?"

Her voice was stern. "If you had to scrub it . . ."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. He tip-toed with long steps back to the porch. Then he turned and grinned at her. "You're the nicest thing."

She gave him a slight smile then. "Then you'd better be nice, too."

Another time he came in when she was on a stepladder hanging the curtains she had washed and ironed. She didn't know he was in the room until she felt his hand sliding along her leg.

"Milt!" she exclaimed.

"Prettiest legs a woman ever had," he grinned up at her. She brushed his hand away. "Remember you've got those rabbits to kill for Everybody's Market. You better get to work, young man."

"Let the little bunnies live," he said with a grin of boyish naughtiness. "Let them live while I live."

She stopped his hand again. "If you don't behave, you'll be back on that couch."

She really meant what she said. She couldn't let him think he could have her whenever he wanted. Certainly not when there was work to be done. He tried to make a joke out of it by saying, "Not that! Not that! I'll be good." But he knew it was not a joke, neither with her nor with him.

That night, in bed, he lay exhausted at her side, his hand in hers. By turning her eyes, she could see his face in the dim light. He looked, she thought, much more like a little boy than a man. And the way his hand lay in hers made her think of a mother holding the hand of her child.

These touched her deep down inside, deeper than she recognized. But they also made her angry. He was not a man. He was just a boy who had grown big in body but not in spirit. He was a little boy who still pleaded and begged for his mother's breast.

Well, she was not his mother, and she did not intend to try to be. He could beg and plead with her, but the breast she

gave him was not out of love for him. She would give him no part of herself, her real self. She would let him use her body, but he could never use her heart. And he would have to be satisfied with that and pay for it, too.

As she watched him, she wondered how she would make him say what she wanted him to say. She felt that he already wanted to say it, but was somehow afraid. She did not yet know him well enough to be sure of just how and when to lead him to say it.

But as if he responded to her unexpressed will, he said it. She saw his lips move, like two tiny dark shadows parting and coming back together again.

"Scylla," he said.

She waited for a moment, then said, "Yes, Milt."

"Scylla," he said again, and didn't seem to be able to go on.

"Yes, Milt," she said again, and lightened her hand around his.

"Scylla. . . ." He suddenly rolled over and put his head on her naked breasts. "You love me, Scylla?" His breath was hot on her flesh.

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Don't you think I do?" she said, making him answer his own question.

He found the answer he wanted. "Will you marry me, Scylla? Please? I love you — God knows I do."

She gave him a direct answer this time, although she let him wait for what seemed to him an eternity. "Yes, Milt."

His arms tightened around her joyously. His face came up to hers. His head was above her now, and he looked longingly down into her eyes. Slowly his lips came down on hers in a kiss of tender thanks.

"I've never wanted a wife before, Scylla," he said. "But I want you for my wife. You're beautiful — you're everything I've ever wanted."

When he paused, she said, "When, Milt?"

"Now, this instant," he said, "if we could. Would you marry me right now?"

"Yes, Milt, I would," she said, and she smiled to herself at how simple it had all been.

"Of course, we can't do it this minute," he said, "except in the eyes of God. He knows now that we're married. But I want to make it legal. I want to tell the whole world you're my wife — now and forever my woman."

She would be his wife, but not his woman. She did not care whether the world knew it or not, and she did not care what God thought about it, but she did want the legality of

it. She did not know what the laws of California were, but she did know that as his legal wife she would share his property and that if he died, she would be his heir. She'd have it all if there was no other family.

"What about your family, Milt?"

"There isn't any. Yours?"

"I haven't any, either."

"Then let's not wait for a blood test. Let's go to Tijuana. It's just across the border from San Diego. It only takes a few minutes down there."

"You mean now?"

"Why not? We can get there in three hours. Be married and back before it's time to feed the rabbits. Let's do it."

Scylla Anderson, twenty-one, and Milton Parson, twenty-six, were married in Tijuana, Mexico, at one-forty-two o'clock on the morning of November 30, 1938, by a city official who was either too sleepy or too drunk to speak the words of the ceremony plainly. But neither of them noticed, and neither of them knew what the words were, anyway, since they did not understand Spanish.

They got back to Los Angeles in time to feed the rabbits, but as soon as they had fed them, Milt insisted that they go back to bed. She objected at first, but finally consented because she was very tired.

A week later, after she had heard that Mexican marriages were sometimes questioned in American courts, she began to worry about whether she had done the right thing in allowing Milt to persuade her into the all-night marriage trip in the panel truck.

And she also began to wonder if it made any difference that she had not given her true name or true age in the Mexican marriage. At the time she hadn't thought it mattered. But now she considered that at some future time there might be a question about the complete legality of the marriage contract, and she wanted by all means to avoid any questions.

She decided there was no use in taking any chances. When she went shopping in Los Angeles the next day, she went to the marriage license bureau in the Hall of Records and asked for an application for a marriage license.

That evening she showed it to Milt. "I think we should get married again, don't you? By the California laws. Some people say that Mexican marriages aren't legal."

"That's a lot of talk, I think," he said. "But, honey, if you want to be sure, then let's do it again. I'll marry you every

day." He hugged and kissed her, and she let him pet her as she smiled outwardly at him and laughed inwardly.

He signed the blank form, and then she filled it out. She did not want him to see the name of Zubitch, since she saw no reason for explaining anything to him, and she entered her age as eighteen.

It was Milt who suggested that they have the ceremony performed by a minister. "That'll make you feel better. Anyway, I guess it should be done by a church. Makes it a little more solemn that way. But nothing could make it any surer for me, Scylla."

Actually she did not care whether a minister performed the ceremony or not, but she let him think she did. And the next Sunday they went to the parsonage of a Pentecostal church on 120th Street and were married again.

It wasn't until after Scylla had made very certain that she was legally married to Milt Parson that she learned how successful, from her own point of view, it all was. She was not only Milt Parson's wife and thereby his sole heir; she was also owner of fifty percent of everything he had under the California community property laws.

Although Scylla acquired some new clothing, she did not set out to squander her new wealth. She was not even interested at that time in asserting her rights of ownership. After all, she knew, the amount of property which then existed was only a start. It was all growing in value, and if she managed well and worked hard, there was every reason to believe that she could one day be the mistress of a considerable sum.

The clothes she bought were simple, sturdy things and only what she needed. She still had the yellow nightgown Peterson had bought for her. It was enough luxury for her requirements, and it was now really excess since she had no occasion to wear it. She preferred, as she always had, to sleep in the raw.

Scylla threw herself into the business of being a housekeeper. She spent long, hard hours in cleaning the house until there was not a speck of dirt anywhere.

Milt once remarked, "They say that cleanliness is next to godliness, and by that you're right close to God, Scylla. I never saw a woman so clean. You do it until it hurts."

And she threw herself into the rabbit-raising business. There was nothing about it she did not soon learn to do. Whether it was lugging the feed to the hutches or raking up the manure, whether it was stretching the hides or cutting off the heads and ripping open the bellies of the animals so

that their entrails spilled into the tub below — regardless of what there was to do, she did it. She drove herself not only to do it but to do it faster, better, and more economically than Milt could do it. She could not allow him to be superior to her in any way.

But the most interesting part of raising the rabbits, to her, was the breeding. The whole process held a strange fascination for her. The first time she watched it, she somehow felt a kinship to it.

When Milt picked up the doe and carried her kicking and clawing to the cage of the buck, she thought, that rabbit doesn't want it. She's fighting to keep away from it.

She thought that it was unnecessarily cruel of Milt to carry the struggling animal to the cage of the buck. "Why do you have to do that?" she demanded.

"What?" he said, not understanding what she talking about.

"Take her out of her pen and stuff her in there with the buck?"

He laughed. "Well, now, Scylla! After all, honey, the birds and bees all do it, they say. Besides, we need little rabbits."

Anger flared in her. She did not like him to make fun of her. "I mean handling her that way."

"But it doesn't hurt her," he protested. "And you got to admit she might like getting in there."

"No," Scylla said harshly. "Stupid, I mean why do you have to take her out of her own pen?"

He understood then. "But, honey, it's got to be that way, or she'd kill the buck."

"She'd kill him?" Scylla was terribly interested. "Why?"

"Well, you see, that's her house over there. It's hers, and she won't have anyone else in it. She'd kill another female if she came into her house. And she'd also kill any male who came in there. You can't put the buck in with her. It won't work."

"How natural," she said without realizing that she was saying it out loud. She decided then that the female rabbit was the most intelligent animal she had ever heard about. The rabbit had better sense than most female humans. Women did not have sense enough to fight for their rights, even to their death, as did the female rabbit.

She ran forward and stroked the doe as Milt shoved her inside the buck's cage and fastened the door.

Scylla watched the doe with admiration as she hopped around the cage. And she laughed at the buck. His nose

working madly and his nervous leaping about seemed so ridiculous. Just like a man, she thought.

As she watched the buck nuzzle the fur around the neck of the doe, she thought of the men she had known. And she thought, too, of herself, and she saw how the doe kept her bottom flat on the floor of the cage and gave no other signs of response to the buck's urgency. "She's letting him worry," she whispered to herself. "Good for her!"

The mounting tension in the buck made him leap around crazily, and Scylla smiled. The doe sat still, even when he fumbled and made false starts. She seemed to pay no attention to him and still kept her bottom on the floor of the pen.

She noticed little flecks of blood on the buck and thought how insanely crazy the male was, willing to destroy himself for the sake of a moment's pleasure. "Stupid!" she said.

The doe did nothing to help him and often moved just enough to cause him to slip and fall over her. She was neither willing nor interested in harming herself and not in the least concerned with whether or not he harmed himself. She bided her time, waited until she was ready, completely unmindful of him.

Finally she raised her back side when it seemed that the buck was at the point of exploding into thin air.

The buck was completely insane, Scylla thought, in his wild, unbridled attack. His mad movements contrasted with the perfect, unmoving calm of the doe. Only the doe seemed to have any sanity now. Only she seemed to have any control. Only she was in command of the situation.

A strange new strength seemed to flow through Scylla's veins. She was seeing in these insignificant animals a confirmation of something she had always felt. The soft-furred doe in the wire cage was showing her that always she had been right. The doe was demonstrating how the female could and should let the male think he was the master when actually only she was supreme. The buck meant nothing to her. She was only using him to perform a brief service for her, and thereafter she would despise and hate him. Once he had fertilized her ovum, he was finished. He could do nothing else for the processes of life. He was then a useless and needless thing, something to be tolerated only until she needed him again.

Scylla felt a strong kindred spirit with the doe in the cage. She felt a link between the doe and herself which was closer than any link she had ever felt with any human being.

The climax of the process was the final confirmation of

what she felt with the doe. The buck, clutching a puff of her neck fur in his teeth, threshed madly, wildly, insanely for a fleeting second or two and then collapsed. All the strength of his haunches, all the tension of his muscles, all the power and force of his being suddenly vanished. He flopped on the floor of the cage, panting desperately for breath, and Scylla burst into high-pitched laughter.

From across the opposite row of hutches Milt called, "Hey, what's so funny?"

She couldn't stop laughing for a moment, and he came around to where she stood pointing at the collapsed figure of the buck.

"Stupid, stupid!" she cried.

The doe hopped to the other side of the cage, giving the buck a kick with her hind foot as she did so. "Oh, that's so funny!" There were tears in Scylla's eyes from her laughter.

Milt chuckled with her. "Oh, that's the way they always do. What's so funny?"

She continued to laugh. "I don't know, I don't know — it's just funny, awfully funny."

"If you get such a kick out of it, you'll have to watch it all the time. We have plenty of that going on. I've seen it a thousand times at least." He went up to the cage to remove the doe.

"So have I," she said without realizing what she was saying.

"You what?" He turned back toward her. "I didn't know . . ."

"I mean I'd like to see it," she corrected herself as she realized that what she was saying to him was that she had seen the same thing happen with each of the men who had ever made love to her.

As Milt's fingers dug into the loose neck hide of the doe and he lifted her out of the cage, Scylla ran up and took the doe. "Here, let me do it."

"Careful, she'll scratch hell out of you. Her claws are like razor blades."

She took the rabbit. "I'll manage her." And as she placed her back in her own cage, she gently petted the animal. "Nice, girl, nice girl," she said.

After that Scylla attended to all of the breeding of the rabbits, for she never lost the fascination of watching the perfect behavior of the female and the stupid actions of the male.

CHAPTER V

Scylla not only took over the breeding of the rabbits. She took over the complete management of Milton Parson and all he possessed. Gradually Milton Parson, who had been the master of the house in which he lived alone, became the servant who was permitted to live in it. Milton Parson, who had been the owner and manager of a growing rabbit-raising business, became the man of all work, taking his orders and instructions from Scylla.

In her way Scylla was good to Milt. She asked him to do nothing which she herself would not do, whether it was the collecting and banking of the money or the shoveling of rabbit droppings into sacks to sell for fertilizer. In addition, she kept the house spotlessly clean and prepared every bite of food for him with her own hands. She trusted no one in her kitchen, and she insisted always that the food be of the best quality and prepared with care. She bought his clothes and bought only those things which were serviceable. She washed and mended the clothes, keeping him always of nice appearance.

But the work which Milt did was the work directed by Scylla. The food he ate was that selected by Scylla. The clothes he wore were the ones picked out by Scylla. He ate, slept, and worked as Scylla dictated. She rationed out the hours of his life as she saw fit.

Still, Milton Parson could not complain. It was always good food, adequate clothing, and profitable work. Not only did Scylla work, but her business judgment was always sound. He lived comfortably, and they prospered.

Likewise Scylla managed and rationed out her favors to Milt. As a man required food, clothing, shelter, and work, he also required loving comfort and physical release. In her way Scylla was not niggardly with these favors. She comforted Milt when he was weary from work, and she released him when the tensions mounted too high in his body.

Scylla did these things not out of her love for Milton Parson but because she considered them practical and necessary. There was never any consideration of love on her part. To her, Milton Parson was a useful thing, and as such he had to be cared for and handled properly. She had the same

regard for him as she had for the bucks kept for breeding purposes. The bucks served a purpose, and therefore they were entitled to have clean cages—to have their hutches kept cool in the summer and warm in the winter, to have food which was tasty and, above all, nourishing. If they suffered any injuries or ailments, they had to be eased and treated.

But the bucks had their cycle of usefulness. There always came a time when they could no longer perform their purpose as well as they should. When this time came, they were no longer entitled to any considerations of food and shelter. It was then that Scylla reached into the hutch and seized the frightened buck by the loose skin of its neck and carried him to the killing block. Stretching his neck across the block, she raised the beheading cleaver and with a single stroke ended his life.

Now, after eight years, Milt Parson had reached the end of his cycle of usefulness. In those years success had come faster than Scylla had dreamed it would. With the war came meat rationing, and the demand for rabbit meat multiplied and multiplied again. And Scylla found many ways, all profitable, to evade regulations. This was always over the protests of Milt, but she never listened to Milt, anyway.

"If we don't get that money, someone else will," she told him. "You just leave it to me."

Finally Milt said no more. He left that and all other business matters to her.

Scylla proved that she not only had an uncanny sense of how to make the greatest profit from the rabbitry, but that she had a Midas touch in other things. The housing shortage of the war was gold to her. She bought up all the vacant land around the rabbitry and began putting up places to rent. She started by moving the small house to one lot and replacing it with a modern three-bedroom house for herself and Milt, making the rent of the small house pay for it. But she realized that the greatest profit came from multiple-dwelling units. With her ability to evade regulations she began filling the area with apartment houses. And she plowed back the profits of one investment into another bigger and more profitable investment.

Scylla never allowed herself to become extravagant in her own living. The house in which they lived was comfortable but not elaborate. There was nothing to suggest that she had once dreamed briefly of winding stairs and swimming pools.

The only luxury which Scylla allowed herself was a small

cottage on a sandy stretch of Seal Beach, fifteen miles away. She bought it solely because she felt the need of a place where she could be totally alone with herself and with the sea.

There was something about the sea which reached out and clutched Scylla and held her fast. She never understood what this was. It might have been the roar of the surf pounding incessantly against the land or the sound of the water running over the sandy beach, tearing it away and sucking it back, or the rippling calm of the Pacific, with its fathomless depths surging far down below, or the salty taste of its water, or the always different but still the same blue-green color. Or perhaps it was the soothing yet exciting feeling of the tongues of water on the skin when it was warm, or the way its cold hand slid stingingly over the body at other times, or the thousands of smells of water, of fish, of sea weeds.

She only knew that to her there was a comfort and a deep thrill in being near the sea. And that was why she had to have the cottage in Seal Beach. It was the one luxury she permitted herself, for it was the one place where she could escape her own tensions, find a sort of troubled peace with herself.

She always had the beach cottage completely to herself. Milt disliked, was even afraid of the sea. "Gives me the willies," he would say. "You can have it."

The only amusement which Scylla allowed herself was the movies. She was an avid movie fan and never missed any picture she could possibly get to. The movies were something more than an escape from everyday problems for her. They were an indescribable tie between her and Samuel J. Peterson. Although she never once saw his name on a film, she could imagine that Samuel J. Peterson had something to do with each picture she saw.

This gave her a queer sort of satisfaction. Although Peterson had made false promises to her, although he had deserted her in the Venice hotel room without explanation, although he had beaten her with the lash of his tongue that last evening they had been together, Scylla never really hated him. There was something about the toadlike little man which was strong, big, and magnificent. She never forgave him for what he did to her, but she never forgot him, either.

Movies, like the beach cottage, were something which Milt did not enjoy. "Don't see nothing to them," he would say. So Scylla went alone, and she went as often as she could.

Since the movies and the beach cottage were two things which she had completely unto herself, it was only natural that they should figure closely in Scylla's plans to rid herself of Milt.

Scylla didn't want to have to kill Milt, any more than she wanted to kill a buck which had served his purpose. She would just as soon have turned the buck loose to run wild, seeking his own shelter and finding his own food. But she knew that the buck would never leave the place where he had learned to live, where he had found food, shelter, and sex. If she let him loose, he would be unhappy; he would go hungry often and have to sleep in the cold. He would be an easy victim of disease and of all his natural enemies — dogs, cats, and other men. Alone he was a lost, inadequate thing.

It was the same with Milt. He, too, would be a lost, inadequate thing if she drove him from the house where he had found comfort, nourishment, and sex which he mistook for love. And the worst of it was that, with that strange stubbornness of his, he would not really go.

Scylla had started a program once to make Milt realize that he was no longer needed and that it would be the best thing for him to leave her. She had initiated the program by refusing him her favors for the first time.

"Get the hell away," she told him one night when he approached her. "Get!"

"But, Scylla. . . ." he pleaded.

"Get away, I said."

"What's the matter with you lately? You didn't used to be this way."

"Well, I am now. I don't want you to touch me. Not ever any more."

"You can't mean that, Scyl. You just can't mean it, really."

"I mean it all right."

He shook his head and crawled back to his side of the bed. "I don't know what's come over you, why you're so cranky."

"I'm not cranky," she cried at him. "I just don't want you any more. Can't you understand that?"

He couldn't understand it. He said, "Women sure are funny. But you'll get over this, Scyl. You'll find you don't really mean any of it."

She couldn't shake his simple, stupid faith.

Next she began spending more and more time at the beach cottage. Sometimes she would stay there for two or three

days. The first time she remained there overnight without telling him first that she intended to stay there, Milt came searching for her in the middle of the night.

She could see the relief in his strained face when she opened the door to his pounding. "Scylla!" he said. "You're all right?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" she demanded.

"Well . . . Well, I guess there's no reason, Scylla. But I was terribly worried about you. You didn't say you were going to stay here."

"I don't have to tell you everything."

"Well, no, of course you don't, Scylla. But I was worried. . . ."

"Well, you can forget it." She started to close the door. "I'm all right. Now get out and leave me alone!" She slammed the door hard.

From the window she saw him standing at the foot of the steps looking at the closed door. After a moment he turned and walked to his car. He never again came to the beach cottage looking for her. Neither did he ever question her when she returned home after an absence. But nothing she did changed his stubborn faith that she'd get over this mood and want him again.

Finally Scylla came straight out and told Milt that she wanted him to leave her for good.

"I want you to give me a divorce, Milt."

His eyes were filled with pain as he looked at her. "But, Scylla. . . ."

"No buts about it, Milt. You heard me. I want a divorce."

He sat rigid and tense for a long moment, and she stared directly at him. Finally he sighed, got up, and walked back and forth across the room, folding and unfolding his hands.

"I reckon if that's what you want, Scylla, you can have it. You've talked to a lawyer about it?"

"No need for a lawyer," she said. "You clear out, and then I'll get one."

"Well, you'll have to have some legal grounds, you know. You can't just say you want it and have it granted."

Up to that moment she had not considered the legal phase of it. "If you get out, that'll be grounds, won't it?"

"Not actually," he said. "I wouldn't be deserting you."

"But we can call it that. That's what I'll tell them. You deserted me."

He chewed his lip thoughtfully. "I guess you could do that. I guess it would be called that if no one knew the truth."

"Well, then do it. Get out."

He sat down in his chair, then got up and paced back and forth some more. "There's more to it than just a divorce, Scylla."

"More?"

"Yes, the property."

There was no question in Scylla's mind about the property. Milt himself had often said that he owed it all to her, that without her he'd probably still be piddling along in his little rabbit business, with no thought of expansion, of buying more property, of making more money. And if he owed it all to her, it was hers, wasn't it?

She told Milt exactly that. "It's my property."

"No, Scylla," he said slowly. "It's our property."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "You know you've said over and over that I've been the one who's built up this property, that you'd never have done it without me."

"Sure, Scylla, I admit all that. But I've worked. I'm entitled to something, am I not? And didn't I have something to start with?"

What he'd had to start with she'd built up into holdings worth more than two hundred thousand dollars. Always in the back of her mind, ever since she'd gotten used to thinking in terms of big money, that amount had been her goal. The idea of giving it up now was fantastic.

"I'll give you twice as much as you started with." She was being generous. "You can have the lot with the old house on it. It's worth two or three times what it was when we were married."

"You're not being fair about this, Scylla," he said. "I grant you you've been very shrewd in handling our affairs. I could never have done it. We've prospered more than I ever dreamed possible. I give you full credit."

"Then you admit it," she said. "The property is mine."

"No," he said stubbornly. "The property is ours. If you want a divorce, we'll divide the property."

"Of course, we'll divide it," she said quickly. "That's why I'm telling you you can have the old house as yours."

"Not that way, we won't divide it. We'll divide it like the law says, half and half."

"Half and half!" She was angry now. "What makes you think you're entitled to half of everything? You yourself say I'm the one who's made the property, worked and slaved and managed, and now you think you can have half of it."

"Remember, I've worked too."

"Anybody, any man, could have done what you've done."

"Maybe," he said. "But the law says husband and wife own fifty-fifty of everything they've built up during the marriage."

Scylla knew she was at a disadvantage with regard to the legalities. "I don't believe it," was all she could say then, but the next day she went to consult an attorney.

It was then that Scylla learned that the very law which had given her half of Milt Parson's property when they were married now had her trapped. Community property was equally owned, and now Milt Parson was entitled by law to one half of everything if they were divorced.

Scylla asked the attorney many questions then, not only about the community property laws, but about the divorce laws. She listened closely when the attorney explained that the court could make whatever disposition of property it felt was proper in a divorce proceedings.

"You mean if I got the divorce, the judge could give me whatever he thought was right?"

"It is the custom of the courts," the attorney said, "to favor the woman in these matters. And most particularly if there are good grounds to consider the husband at fault in the marriage contract."

Scylla caught the idea quickly. "If my husband deserted me?"

"Desertion is a very serious charge in the eyes of the court." The attorney watched her.

"What's the most serious?"

"That's difficult to answer. Sometimes it depends on the judge's own background and his concepts of morals. Infidelity is always an unpardonable act on the part of either marriage partner."

Scylla could not imagine how she could prove that Milt was unfaithful.

The attorney also explained that immorality inside the marriage was as serious as immorality outside the marriage. Scylla didn't understand what he was trying to say at first.

Then she did understand, and she saw a possibility. She said tentatively, "Well, he's always been strange. Of course, I don't know about those things."

"I can understand," the attorney said. "It may be that what you have accepted as normal, because of your own innocence and inexperience, has not been normal at all. It might have been such that it would constitute grounds for divorce. Would you care to tell me something of your private life?"

Scylla dropped her eyes from his. "I . . . I don't know. . . ." she said, pretending embarrassment while she tried to think of what she should say.

"I can understand your embarrassment, Mrs. Parson," he said with kindness. "Of course, if I were to handle such a case, I would have to know everything."

"Yes . . . yes, I guess . . . but it's so hard. . . ." She was surprised at how well she was acting.

The attorney got up from his chair and came around the desk. He laid his hand on her shoulder as she kept her face turned away. "I understand, Mrs. Parson. I understand. You'll have to get used to the idea of talking about such things. It doesn't come easy. Suppose we don't try to rush it now. Suppose you come back again — say, Wednesday at three — and we'll talk some more."

Scylla knew that she had the attorney convinced there was some deep, dark secret in her private life, and she wished there were, so she would have a sure way of forcing Milt Parson to surrender his rights to the property. Through her mind were rushing thoughts of how she could build a case against him. But she had to have time to think it all out.

"Thank you very much," she said as she arose. "I'll be back Wednesday."

By Wednesday Scylla had a story to tell the attorney which almost shocked his calloused senses. According to the picture which she painted for the attorney, Milton Parson was an insatiable sex monster who had for all these years kept her a prisoner in marriage for his perverted purposes.

"You poor woman!" the attorney said. "To think you've endured these unspeakable crimes all these years!"

Scylla sobbed nicely into her handkerchief. "I guess I just didn't know. I thought a wife had to do whatever the man told her."

"I'll say she doesn't have to endure things like that!" the attorney said. "When we present this to the court, you'll have your divorce just as fast as the law allows. And we can also prefer criminal charges against him, send him where he won't have the opportunity to lure another innocent woman into such a relationship."

Scylla stopped her sobbing. "Criminal charges?"

"Yes, criminal charges!" The attorney stood up and strode across his office. "These things are not only a violation of the marriage contract, but they are also against public morals. They are crimes punishable by imprisonment."

Somehow the idea of sending Milt to prison did not appeal to her. All she wanted from him was the property.

"All I want is my freedom," she said, "and what is mine."

"Yours? Why, my dear, everything is yours! No court in the land would allow him any part of the property. It would be a small payment to you for the torture you have suffered all these years."

The attorney sat down at his desk again, took pencil and pad. "All we have to do is to prove these things in court. Now tell me who else knows about these things."

"Who else? Why . . ."

"We need something more than your statement, something to substantiate your testimony. Your mother? sister? a friend?"

"I haven't any mother or family," she said. And she knew, too, that she did not have a single friend.

"But there must be someone who can support your statements," the attorney said. "Anyone. Your children? Even a child's word can be very effective."

"I have no children."

The attorney's face clouded, and Scylla knew that he was disappointed. "Odd, you've never even hinted these things to some other person," he said, and Scylla was afraid that he was beginning to see through the enormous falsehood she had related.

"Of course," the attorney said, "we don't need much. It is not expected that there would be eyewitnesses to such acts. However, we might arrange an entrapment."

Scylla was beginning to be afraid that she had trapped herself. "What do you mean?"

"We'll install microphones in the bedroom and record the things he says to you. And with a little planning we might even conceal an operator in a closet, or in some position where he could observe these unholy acts. You would consent to that?"

"But . . ."

"I know, my dear, it would be embarrassing and all that. But you must remember that we have to have evidence which will stand up in court. Just your word alone isn't enough. However, with sufficient evidence we might not even have to go to court."

"Not go to court?"

"It has been my experience, Mrs. Parson, that a man of this caliber isn't anxious to have it generally known. Therefore if we made some recordings of his conversation, had a witness who observed some of it, and a photograph or two

made at the right time, I doubt very much we would ever have to expose them to anyone but your husband. If we played the recording for him, showed him the picture, he'd probably agree to whatever terms you wanted. He'd be glad to allow you to get the divorce on some other grounds. He'd be practically forced into agreement unless he's the type that wouldn't mind letting such things about himself go to court and into public record. Would he do that?"

Scylla realized that her plan had gotten out of hand. There was no way to prove anything against Milton Parson according to law. Her whole idea was a failure, and she was angry with herself for not having understood in the beginning that she could not get away with such a scheme.

However, Scylla did not want to let the attorney know that she had been lying. She wrung her hands nervously and said, "I don't know . . . know whether I could go through with it or not. I'll have to . . . to think it over. I'll come back when I've thought it over."

Scylla never went back to the attorney's office. He telephoned her twice. The first time she told him she had not decided yet, and the second time she said that she was ill and would be in later to see him.

If she was going to get what was rightfully hers, the only solution to the problem, as Scylla saw it, was to kill Milt Parson. Her father had cheated her out of the land he had promised her. Milt, in his stubborn way, was determined to deprive her of the fortune she had built up. She wasn't going to let him do it. No matter what it took to stop him, no man was going to cheat her as her father had cheated her when he'd married that woman and thrown away his promise to Scylla of half the farm.

She carefully laid her plans. She didn't need any lawyer, any judge. This was a way in which she and she alone could handle everything.

CHAPTER VI

Scylla's first step was gradually to empty the house of all the things she wanted for herself. These included all her personal belongings and a few pieces of furniture which she needed at the beach cottage.

She didn't tell Milt until she had the last of the things she

wanted in her De Soto. She walked back to the butchering shed and called Milt to the door.

He came, still carrying the bloody knife he was using. A blood-spattered apron covered his khaki shirt and trousers. She thought that he didn't look much different from the way he'd looked the first day she'd come to the place eight years ago and found him butchering rabbits.

"I'm leaving, Milt," she announced.

"Leaving? Where, Scylla?"

"Leaving you for good. I'm filing for a divorce. I'll go to the beach place until I decide what to do after the divorce."

He shook his head. "But you haven't said anything about the property. Don't you want to settle that?"

"No," she said. It was part of her plan to let Milt think she was no longer interested in the property. "We'll just let the court decide that. Whatever the judge says. I just want to go my own way."

There was misery in his pale blue eyes. "God knows, Scylla, I don't want this to happen. I just don't understand it. I'm willing to do anything to make you happy — you know that."

"Well, things have changed, Milt," she said. "I'm going away. I've thought it all out, and that's what I want to do. Maybe I haven't been a good wife to you."

"You know that's not so, Scylla. You've been a wonderful wife. I love you and always will. But I don't understand you. Maybe after a while you won't want it this way."

She turned and walked down the drive and got into her car. He was still standing at the door of the butchering building as she drove off.

The next three days Scylla spent mostly in calling on their various tenants. In the case of some the rent was due, and her call was ostensibly to collect it. To others, she made some kind of excuse to explain the call — to ask about the water heater, to inspect the kitchen for painting, or whatever served the purpose. In all cases it was a friendly, helpful visit of the property owner who had the tenant's interest at heart.

But after the preliminary talk about whatever she used as the excuse of her visit, she would say, "I won't be at the Willowbrook house any more. If you need anything, you can call me at Seal Beach. The number's Long Beach two-two-three-nine-four. Want to make a note of that?"

"Oh, you're moving down there," the woman would say. "Nice on the beach this time of year."

"Yes, I guess it is." She let her voice explain that she was not at all interested.

"You don't sound happy, Mrs. Parson."

"Happy? How can a woman be happy when she's losing all the things she's loved?"

"Losing? Why, Mrs. Parson, is something wrong?"

Her voice would choke up. "I'm getting a divorce."

"Why, Mrs. Parson! Gee, I'm sorry! Never dreamed there was anything wrong between you and Mr. Parson. He seemed like such a nice . . ."

"I know. I never dreamed of it, either." She cried a little into her handkerchief.

"A woman?"

"Several," she'd nod into her handkerchief. "Just found out recently. Been going on for years behind my back."

When Scylla left, the tenant was thoroughly convinced that she was the innocent victim of a deceiving husband. That was the story she wanted circulated. Some would say they'd always known it. Others would say they could tell by the look in Milt Parson's eyes that he was that kind of man. Some would find little proofs of his evilness, and some might even imagine instances when they were sure Milt Parson had made advances to them.

Having sowed the seeds of gossip, Scylla next began spending most of her time at the Shoreline Theater in Seal Beach.

Scylla had gone to the Shoreline many times before, but now the Shoreline was an important part of her scheme. Up until this time she had never paid any attention to the employees of the movie house, but now she wanted them to know her and wanted to know them.

Now each time Scylla went to the theater, she made it a point to smile at the cashier and the doorman. It was just a slight smile, just enough for them to know that she recognized them as human beings. And she saw that they responded.

After a few times she increased the smile and added to it a nod, just a very slight nod. By this time she knew that each remembered her from the day before. To help them remember and as another part of her plan, she always wore a green-and-white flowered scarf. Sometimes she carried it in her hand, and sometimes she wore it around her neck. When there was a brisk breeze off the Pacific, she would wear it over her reddish hair and knotted neatly below her chin.

It was on a windy evening of the second week that Scylla added to the smile and the nod a spoken greeting. To the

blond girl in the glassed-in ticket cage she said, "Windy this evening."

And the girl said, "Glad I'm inside."

To the husky young man at the door she said, "Wish this wind would stop."

He replied, "Me, too. Probably will. We don't get many windy evenings."

Scylla did not like the looks of the blond girl who sold the tickets, but there was something about the husky young man who took them at the door which pleased her. There was a freshness and a cleanness about him which she liked. And his voice, deep yet clear, was more pleasing than she had expected. He was still in school — college probably, she guessed. She knew that it would be pleasant using him in her plan, and she even allowed her mind to speculate briefly on how interesting it might be to use him in another way.

Such thoughts were only passing fancies, for Scylla did not want to become involved. And she did not want, above all things, to frighten him. There was something about his cleanness and neatness which warned her that he was the same way morally and would not dream of any act not totally correct, especially with a woman older than he.

By the end of the third week Scylla had gotten to the point of short conversations with the young man. By timing her arrival at the theater just before the end of a feature, she could say that she did not like to go in at the last of a picture and so would have a few minutes in which she could wait outside and talk with him.

It was during these exchanges of conversation that she learned that his name was Don Bradford, that he was almost twenty-one, that a minor knee injury had kept him out of the service, and that he was going to Long Beach City College. He expected to become an electrical engineer.

Scylla expressed great interest in his ambitions and assured him that he could make his dreams come true. At the same time she found occasion to tell him that she was Scylla Parson, that she lived in the last cottage on the beach front, and that she was staying there alone while she got a divorce from her husband. She did not tell him why she was obtaining a divorce, but she let him assume that it was something very tragic to her. Usually when she talked to him, she would handle the green-and-white scarf, drawing it back and forth in a manner which appeared to show that she was nervous and totally unconscious of what she was doing with the scarf.

Don Bradford responded to Scylla exactly as she had cal-

culated. He was friendly, and he was sympathetic. This was all she wanted of him, although the thought kept entering her mind that other things with him would be interesting. And once she almost gave way to these feelings.

That night, as she often did, she stayed in the movie until the last feature ended, the screen went white and then black, and the lights of the auditorium were suddenly turned up bright. She made her way from her sixth-row seat, the one she almost always occupied, to the front lobby, behind the score or more of other patrons still in the theater. Don was waiting to close and lock the door.

From the door she could see the thick fog which had rolled in suddenly from the ocean. She was genuinely frightened of the fog. It was the one thing she disliked about the beach. It closed in around you and sucked away your sense of time and sense of direction, and Scylla wanted nothing to deaden or destroy any of her senses.

"It's awfully thick, isn't it?" she said.

"Pretty thick," Don agreed. "Hope you're not driving."

"That's the trouble," she said. "I'm scared to death of fog."

"Leave your car here," he suggested.

"Guess I could," she said slowly. "Yet I don't like to do that. You don't have a night watchman?"

"No, we don't, Mrs. Parson," he said, "and I guess you'd be taking a chance leaving it here. But then the fog might not be so bad. You don't have far to go."

"Far enough," she said.

And then he said what she might have expected him to say if she had planned it. "If you don't mind, I could drive your car home for you. Fog doesn't bother me too much."

"Would you? I'd appreciate it. But then what about yourself?"

"Only a few blocks," he said. "I'll walk back and get my own car then."

"I hate to put you out."

"No trouble, Mrs. Parson. Glad to do it. Just wait outside until I lock up, and I'll drive you home."

Don Bradford drove the De Soto through the pea-soupy fog with expert care. There was something about the way he handled the car that made Scylla forget her own fears of the fog. He was no longer just an ambitious young man working his way through school. He was instead a mature man giving a woman his power, his direction, and his protection. And something deep inside Scylla stirred with a disturbing force.

While she sat almost relaxed, her fear almost forgotten,

he turned the car into the driveway. For the moment she was lost in a feeling that she had missed something in life in not having a man, like this young man, to do things for her and show her what to do for herself.

"I'll put it in the garage," he said as he turned to her. "Have you the key to the garage?"

The statement startled her from the dreamy depth into which she had sunk in the few minutes it took to reach the beach cottage. "It's not locked," she said, and then caught herself. "Leave it here."

But he was already out of the car. "Only take a minute." He lifted the overhead door and strode back to the car. "You get out now," he said. It was a request and also a direction, and before she realized it, she had obeyed him.

She waited until he had put the car away and returned to where she stood at the foot of the front steps. "Your key." He held out her car key.

"Won't you come in for a moment?" she asked. It was almost a plea. For now she wanted this young man to stay near her. "I'll make some coffee."

"It's late," he said. "Thank you just the same, Mrs. Parson. I have to . . ."

She didn't want him to leave. "Or I have some stronger things — if you'd like a drink."

"Coffee would be fine," he grinned, and his whole face was a part of the grin.

"Then come on," she said, and strangely added, "Please."

"Well . . ." He took a step to follow. "I could use a cup of coffee. But of course I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble. I'd love to fix it for you. I was going to have some myself. I always drink coffee. Never keeps me awake. You know I think that's all in the mind, don't you?"

She wondered why she was talking so much; she had never done that before. She knew she wasn't saying anything important, but somehow she wanted to keep on talking to this young man.

He waited for her to unlock the front door, then followed her inside. "Duke University conducted experiments, you know," he said as a man of knowledge. "They proved that coffee doesn't keep you awake and that hot milk doesn't put you to sleep, either. It's all in the mind if it does."

She threw off her coat and pulled the green-and-white scarf from around her reddish hair. "I've never put any stock in that coffee-keeping-you-awake business," she chatted. "I've

always drunk coffee whenever I wanted it, before going to bed or even in bed."

She had intended to tell him to sit down while she prepared the coffee, but he seemed to want to follow her into the kitchen, and she was glad. She kept chatting away as she plugged in the coffeepot and asked him what sort of a sandwich he would like. He decided on a ham sandwich, because he said that would be the easiest for her to fix.

"And now," she said as she set the sandwiches and coffee on the table, then sat down herself, "tell me something about yourself."

His mouth twisted into a grin she didn't like. It was too boyish. "Not much to tell about me."

"There must be a lot," she encouraged him.

"Just my school," he said. He began to tell her again, in greater detail this time, of his ambitions to become an electrical engineer, explaining that he did not want to stop with the ordinary electrical things but wanted to go on into electronics. "That's the coming field. Before long we'll be doing almost everything with electronics."

Electronics were far above her comprehension, but she listened as if she understood. It occurred to her that this was a silly thing for her to do, for what did she really care about the ambitions of this gullible young man? Still, she found herself enjoying it and listened to the expanding pride in his voice as he warmed to the sense of his intellectual superiority over her.

From the mere enjoyment of the situation Scylla found herself slipping into a deeper, rich pleasure. Don Bradford was much nearer a man than any man she had ever met before, she thought.

She poured the second and then the third cup of coffee to keep him talking. She said just enough to encourage him, asked just enough questions to keep him explaining. With her arms folded, she leaned on the edge of the table, looking always directly into his face.

And through it all Scylla found questions creeping across the arena of her mind. "Why didn't I meet such a man as this when I was his age or younger?" was followed by, "What difference does age make?" She could give this man more than any of the girls he saw in school. She knew more than any of them could know for years to come.

Without her conscious realization of it, Scylla leaned harder on her arms on the edge of the table. Her great breasts

were brought up and out as if reaching across the table toward him in an offering of themselves.

It wasn't until she became aware of the halting tones entering his voice and saw the strange look filling his eyes as he stared across at her that she realized what was happening. His eyes were no longer directed into her eyes. Instead they were directed down. And a flick of her own eyes showed her why. He was suddenly staring into the dark cavern between her breasts.

"I . . . I . . ." He could no longer find words to express what he wanted to say. "I . . . I guess I'd better be going." He wrenched his eyes free and stood up.

As he stepped around the table, she touched his hand. "You're not leaving! So soon? Tell me more. . . ."

He looked down at her and immediately jerked his eyes away. "I gotta get going."

She lifted herself then, bringing her body up near his. He was taller than she was. She let her thigh graze his, and she could feel the hot tenseness of him.

Suddenly he twisted and grabbed her shoulders. He didn't pull her to him, because he was afraid. In the moment his eyes met hers and she locked them to her own, she saw the terrible want in him.

For a flashing instant she was glad to see that want there.

And then he said, "Mrs. Parson . . ."

It was the incredible need he put into the way he said her name that exploded the whole dream in which she had been wallowing. Out of the explosion she was herself again. This was not a superior man. This was just another man. A man who was begging her to tell him what to do. A man who was too much of a coward to take what he wanted. A man who was afraid of her. A man she could do with as she wanted.

She wanted to scream at him to get out, to get out of her sight and out of her mind. But she remembered that she still needed to use this young man, and she did not want to offend him too deeply.

"Good night," she said, making it decisive, almost offensive. "Thanks for bringing me home."

His hands dropped quickly from her shoulders. "Any time, Mrs. Parson," he said as he hurried toward the door. "Any time."

As he left, she wondered exactly what he meant by, "Any time." Then she began to laugh. The stupid little jerk!

But she slammed doors and yanked open drawers and dropped her comb twice as she prepared for bed.

Before she went to sleep, she cursed herself for having been such a fool. How could she have thought this half-baked young man was any different from any other man? How could she have let herself feel drawn to him? What was there about an inexperienced boy such as he was which could possibly be of benefit to her?

But she was glad she had let Bradford come to her house, glad he had fallen prey to the lure of her body. Now he was certain to serve her purpose, because he would feel ashamed and indebted to her. That was the way she wanted him to be.

CHAPTER VII

The next day Scylla flew to Kansas City. This was one of the final steps in her plan, and she knew it required extreme caution.

She took a local bus from Seal Beach to Long Beach. There she boarded the Pacific Electric interurban car for downtown Los Angeles, getting off at Sixth and Main. Then she walked along Sixth to Olive Street, to where most of the airlines have their offices.

She took her chances on finding a plane seat. She found that United Airlines had a direct flight leaving from the International Airport within two hours. She purchased the ticket in cash and gave the name of Sylvia Anderson and her address as the Biltmore Hotel, which was just around the corner.

Scylla had decided on the name of Sylvia Anderson while she rode the interurban into Los Angeles, passing directly in front of the Willowbrook place. From the window she saw Milt at the front bank of hutches. He had a feed pail on his arm, and she knew he was late with his morning feeding.

The name of Sylvia struck her because it was something like Scylla. And Anderson was the name Samuel J. Peterson had first given her in the Douglas hotel the night he registered them in separate rooms.

"You have transportation to the airport?" the airline clerk asked her.

"I'll drive out," she told him.

Instead she went around to the front of the Biltmore and took the Airport Transport bus to the airport. All this made it more inconvenient than would have been necessary if she'd made reservations from Seal Beach and driven her own car to the airport. But she did not want it to be easy to trace her footsteps, just in case that was ever done.

Late that afternoon she was in Kansas City. She rode the airport bus into downtown Kansas City then took a taxi to Union Station. There she checked her overnight bag, the only luggage she carried. She could have checked the bag at a dozen other places, but Scylla remembered checking a bag there once before when she'd been in Kansas City after hitch-hiking from Ohio.

It was because Scylla remembered something special about Kansas City that she had gone there. She remembered a pawnshop on Cherry Street and that one of the things which were often left there was guns. Of course, guns were often left at all pawnshops, but the guns left at this one were "rods," "heaters," the kind used by professional criminals.

Scylla knew about this particular pawnshop because she had once pawned a gun there. She hadn't known anything about guns at that time and still didn't know much, but the five dollars she'd gotten for that gun was all she'd gotten for spending three days in a rooming house with a man who had picked her up on the street.

She had been desperate then, and when the young man approached her, she would have accepted almost any kind of proposition. He was a dark man, short and nervous. All he wanted from her was someone to sleep with, and they spent most of the three days in bed. He had their food brought in to them by a gaunt old woman who apparently ran the rooming house.

There was nothing 'impressive about the time they spent in the room. She was as tired and hungry as he was nervous, and she was perfectly willing to remain inside the room. It gave her three days of rest, three days of plenty to eat.

She had not set a price on herself before they took the room. She had been too anxious to have any room at all then, and later she decided to depend upon his generosity — a thing she subsequently learned not to do with men.

He called himself Brooks, and that was all she ever knew about him. He was carrying the gun, and he placed it on the dresser near the bed when they first undressed. It remained there during the whole time. It neither impressed nor frightened her.

The third day the old woman came to the door and said something to him. He was wearing only his trousers at the time, and he told her to wait. He slipped on his shoes and put on his shirt and tie. He pushed his arms into his coat and then picked up the gun. She lay in bed, watching him without any special concern. She wondered why he wanted the gun, and as if her wondering made him decide not to take it, he suddenly put it down again.

"Take it easy, sugar," he said to her. "Back in a few minutes."

That was the last she ever saw of Brooks, or whatever his name was. She never knew whom he was to meet or why he had not taken his gun. She suspected what had happened to him when she saw the headlines in the *Star* two days later about a gangster killing. It wasn't until the day after when she picked up a paper on a park bench that she read the story.

The story related the finding of the body of a man tentatively identified as Philip Abrahams, a suspected triggerman in another recent killing. The body was nude and riddled with bullets, and Scylla could not tell anything from the picture in the paper. However, the general description was the same, including a scar on the left shoulder, which she had noticed.

The incident was the deciding factor in starting Scylla toward California. She did not know for sure that the two men were the same, but she did not want to take any chance of being questioned in the case.

Scylla had taken the gun the man had left on the dresser to the Cherry Street pawnshop and had received five dollars for it. Later she learned that this particular shop was a favorite place for professionals to exchange their guns; a man from St. Louis told her about it during a night she spent with him. He, too, she suspected, was a professional criminal, although he said he wrote true crime stories and had learned about the pawnshop while investigating a case.

This had all been nine years before, but somehow Scylla expected the shop still to be there doing the same kind of business. She was not at all surprised to find the shop looking almost as it had nine years before. The little old man who came forward to wait on her was, she felt sure, the same man who had given her the five dollars on the gun.

"I'd like to see some revolvers," she told him.

He peered over his eyeglasses at her. His eyes traveled from her eyes down the length of her. She knew he was

sizing her up not for her beauty but for who she might be.

She had expected this. "It's all right, Uncle," she said. "I'm going on a trip across the country, driving alone, and thought I ought to have something to protect myself with."

A faint smile crossed his wrinkled face. "Pretty woman like you should have a man doing that," he said.

"Thanks, Uncle," she laughed, "but my husband might not like it that way. You see, he's waiting for me in New York."

The little old man decided that she was all right or at least right enough to take a chance on. "What kind of gun?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just something to scare off anyone I might have trouble with."

He showed her several small guns, but she rejected each one for one reason or another. "Let me see some of the bigger ones." She pointed to some .38 caliber revolvers.

He pulled out three from a drawer, and then as he laid them on the counter, he suddenly started to put one back. Scylla reached for it before he could turn around. For all that she could see, it was no different from the other two, but she knew somehow it was different because the little old man had not intended to show it to her.

"I'll take this one," she said without knowing just why. "How much?"

"The others are cheaper," he said quickly, "and just as good." He reached to take it, but Scylla drew it back from him.

"How much?" she repeated.

She could sense in the little man a hesitation and then his decision to take a chance on her. But she knew that he was going to make her pay well for that special gun.

"One hundred dollars," he said. "You can have your choice of the others for sixty."

"I'll take it," Scylla said, and began opening the extra-large purse she had brought with her. Without letting him have the gun back, she dropped it into her bag and took out her billfold. She picked a hundred-dollar bill from the others and handed it to him.

"Ammunition? I'll need a box, I suppose."

"Yes, I have some," he said. "That'll be another ten."

She knew he was charging her outrageous prices, but for this occasion she did not mind. She handed him a ten-dollar bill, and he gave her a box of .38 caliber copper-jacketed cartridges.

Scylla took a taxi back to Union Station, reclaimed her

overnight bag from the locker, and hurried into the rest room. She could hardly wait to examine the gun she had bought. She wanted to know why the pawnbroker had hesitated to sell it to her.

Locked inside a stall of the rest room, she opened her purse and examined the gun. She couldn't see anything special about it. Along the side of the barrel she could see the words, "Colt Official Police .38," stamped in the metal, and on the top of the barrel were some numbers and the word "Colt," again. She couldn't make them out completely, for the light was not bright enough.

She decided then that there was nothing special about the gun itself. It was probably something special which the gun had done — it had probably been used in a holdup to kill someone. If it had been used in a murder, her use of it would be even safer. If this gun was ever connected to the murder of Milton Parson, the police could also connect it to whatever other murder it had been used in, and they could assume both crimes had been committed by the same person.

Scylla took a plane from Kansas City an hour later for Dallas, Texas, because it was one of the first planes she could get and because it suited her purpose to return by a different route. From Dallas she flew to Palm Springs and there took a bus to Los Angeles. She was back in her Seal Beach cottage by noon the next day.

It was when she loaded the .38 that she discovered the probable reason the little old man in the pawnshop hadn't wanted to sell her the gun without being more certain of who she was. When she released the cylinder and let it swing outward for loading, she saw that the serial numbers of the gun had been carefully and completely removed.

That would make the tracing of it almost impossible. She could leave the gun at the scene of the murder if she wanted to and let the police try to connect it to her. There wasn't a soul in all the world who knew she had it except the Kansas City pawnbroker, and there was hardly any way to connect her and the pawnbroker. And she felt sure he would never identify anyone as having purchased a gun from him, even if ever came to that, which it probably wouldn't.

Scylla slipped five cartridges into the cylinder. She left the empty chamber up and closed the cylinder. The gun was now ready.

What to do with the extra cartridges had puzzled Scylla for a moment. She had to dispose of them. Several ideas

came into her mind, but the one she decided on was the ocean. She drove to The Pike, the Long Beach amusement area, and walked out on Rainbow Pier, a circular pier built out into the bay to allow the public to walk out over the water. It was early in the evening and not many people were using the pier. Still, it was dark enough for her not to be noticeable.

She had dumped the loose cartridges into her purse, and as she strolled along, she threw the cartridges one by one into the sea. It would be impossible ever to recover them, she knew. The box itself she left in her purse and burned it in the incinerator behind the cottage the next day.

Now all evidence was destroyed. There remained only the gun itself, and that, she had decided, she would leave at the scene after she had killed Milton Parson.

CHAPTER VIII

It was Tuesday. Thursday was the day which Scylla had selected for the murder. Thursday was the day when Don Bradford had classes at City College until four o'clock and didn't come on duty at the Shoreline Theater until six o'clock. It was also the manager's day off and the evening on which Bradford acted as manager while various substitutes took tickets at the door. In addition, it was the day the Shoreline changed its bill.

All these things were important in Scylla's plan. The fact that the show was a new program was part of her alibi. It was the natural thing for her to go to see the new bill, since she always saw each bill at the Shoreline, and there could be no question of her having seen the particular program earlier.

It was important that Bradford would not be on duty in the afternoon and equally important that he would be there in the evening when she needed him most, but still he would not necessarily be at the door.

Scylla spent Tuesday and Wednesday at her cottage except for one trip to the market, and she stopped at the Hancock Service Station to have her car lubricated and filled with gasoline.

On Thursday she left the beach cottage shortly after lunch — she ate only a sandwich — and after, she had cleaned

up the kitchen and put everything away. The Shoreline opened at one o'clock, and she went in with the early crowd, leaving her DeSoto parked in the lot of a market instead of in the theater parking lot. She timed her entrance along with a miscellaneous crowd of people because she wanted to attract no attention.

Scylla went first to her regular seat, the fourth from the right-hand aisle in the sixth row of the center section. But she stayed there only long enough to do what she wanted to, then moved to another seat. She did not want to be seen in her regular place at that time.

She saw the whole program through once, watching the newsreel and the two features with unusual concentration. When she saw a group leaving, she left along with them, still wanting to attract no attention. Outside she walked quickly back to the beach cottage.

It was just six o'clock when she arrived at the cottage. The next four hours were terribly long for her, but she filled them by preparing her supper — bacon and eggs and two pieces of toast, along with four cups of coffee — and then cleaning up the kitchen. She had time after that to clean the bathroom. Although it did not particularly need it, she got down on her hands and knees and scoured the tile floor with a scrubbing brush.

At nine-thirty she put the .38 in her big black purse and left the cottage. She hurried along the darkened street to the market parking lot and climbed into the De Soto.

It was shortly after ten o'clock when she arrived at the Willowbrook address. She drove by the house once. She saw that the garage door was closed and that one of the trucks was parked in the driveway. And she saw a single light burning in the bedroom. These things told her for sure that Milt was there.

She swung off Willowbrook and drove two blocks west to the parking lot of a drugstore. The question of parking the car had given Scylla much concern. It was a point on which she had to take some risk. She had considered not using the car at all, but that would have meant that she would have had to walk along the street, where she might be seen. She figured that there would be more chance of her being seen that way than if she used her car. However, she did not want to leave the car just anywhere. The parking lot of the drugstore was the nearest place where the car would be the least noticed.

One section of the lot was unlighted, and that was where

she parked the car. She looked around to make sure that there was no one in the lot. Then, holding her big black purse close to her, she slipped out of the car.

Scylla cut through an alley and came out on the opposite street. From there she went south, walked through another alley, and finally approached the Willowbrook house from the rear, passing through the area of rabbit hutches.

She slipped her key into the lock of the rear door, turned it with hardly a click, and entered the house. Her eyes were already adjusted to the dark of the night, but she paused for a few minutes to allow them to become accustomed to the blacker dark of the house. The dining and living rooms were dark. She saw the glow of the one light in the house coming from the bedroom into the hallway. She entered the hallway and walked toward the bedroom where she was certain Milt was.

Milt was there. He was sitting on the edge of the unmade bed, just starting to take off his shoes. He had already taken off his shirt.

"Scylla!" he exclaimed as she pushed the door farther open. He leaped up. "Scylla, my God, you're back!"

"Sit down, Milt," she commanded him.

"Scylla . . . Scylla, you're . . ."

"No, I'm not," she said. "I'm here to give you a last chance, Milt."

"Chance? But, Scylla, you know I'll do anything to make you . . ."

"Then you'll agree to the settlement of the property?" She thought for an instant that she might not have to kill Milt.

"Sure, Scylla, if that's the way you want it."

"Want it! That's the way it's got to be, Milt. It's my property. I intend to have it."

"No, Scylla, our property," he said. "Like I said before, we'll divide it up and each take half."

"Half!" She spat the word at him, for now she knew that he would never agree to her terms. Always she had made him see and do things the way she wanted until now. In this one thing he was a stupid, stubborn fool, and there was no moving him.

"I'm giving you a last chance, Milt," she said, and her fingers tightened on the shape of the gun in the black purse.

"I just don't understand you, Scylla," he said, and began shaking his head. "I just don't understand you."

Her left hand ripped open the zipper of the purse, and her

right hand darted inside and brought out the gun. "Maybe you'll understand this, you fool!"

His eyes widened, his face blanched as he saw the gun pointing at him. Then he half-grinned. "Put that gun away, Scylla," he said. It was a command, an order, the first he had ever given her. It only infuriated her.

"God damn you, Milt!" she cried. She could feel her fingers tightening now. The knurling of the handle was making its pattern in the moist hotness of her palm. Her forefinger was closing into a tighter knot around the trigger.

"Scylla!" he said, rising slowly to his feet. There was fear in his eyes now. He was, as he had always been, a weak, stupid coward. He was afraid of her now, as he had always been. She wanted him to beg her just this once again, to plead with her to give him his life, as he had begged and pleaded with her to give him his supreme pleasure in life.

"Well?" she said.

But he didn't plead then. The begging suddenly left his eyes. For an instant she admired him, and then she hated him all the more for the defiance which replaced the fear in his eyes. This she could not allow. This man had always been hers to rule.

He took a single step toward her and said, "Scylla . . ."

It was his last word. The gun roared. Milt Parson pitched forward on the rug.

The gun had made more noise than Scylla expected, and the sound reverberated in the room for what seemed a long time. For a moment she was frightened. She had not planned to pull the trigger exactly when she did. She had planned to wait until the interurban train clanged by so that the noise of the train would subdue the noise of the gun. But she had pulled the trigger when that last flash of defiance had burned in Milt's eyes, and she had not thought at all about the train.

Suddenly she realized that she was listening not only to the dying roar of the gun but also to the clanging of the interurban train. Unconsciously she had timed the shot exactly as she had planned! She had fired when the train was rushing by!

This meant almost certainly that no one had heard the shot. It was more than two hundred feet to the nearest house. Even if the people there had heard something, they would confuse it with the sounds of the train and not know that it was a gun.

Scylla stepped from the doorway, where she had stood the whole time, to where Milt lay. She leaned down to look

closer at the crimson wound in his neck. The blood was spilling freely onto the rug now, and she could not tell much about the kind of wound. But she could tell what she needed to know. Milt Parson was dead.

Her fierce hatred rose to a new height in her as she watched his life blood seeping into the rug.

"God damn you, Milt!" she said.

Then she straightened up and walked to the door. She wanted to get out of the house quickly now. But at the door she turned and looked back at Milt, the corpse, and said, "It's all mine now."

CHAPTER IX

Scylla was back in her car and driving toward Seal Beach before she remembered that she had not left the gun in the room as she had planned. But she couldn't remember what she had done with it. She pulled over to the side of the street and stopped. She grabbed her purse, and the weight of it told her that the gun was in it. She ran her hand inside the purse and felt the gun without taking it out. Although she had planned to leave the gun at the scene, she was now glad that she hadn't.

She noticed the time on a clock at the Associated Service Station on Long Beach Boulevard. It was sixteen minutes after eleven. The show at the Shoreline would be finished within an hour. She did not want to arrive there too soon. She slowed the car and drove slowly to use up time.

But it was only eleven-forty-five when she reached Seal Beach, so she drove through the city and on down U.S. 101 toward San Diego. She drove almost to Huntington Beach before she made a U turn and headed back toward Seal Beach.

There was no one around the outside of the Shoreline when she arrived at almost midnight. There were still a dozen cars in the parking lot. She drove in and parked her car.

As Scylla had known it would be, the front door of the theater was locked. The cashier's cage closed at eleven-thirty, and the doors were locked then, keeping anyone from entering. Those inside could leave because the doors opened from the inside.

Scylla pounded on the door and rattled the bar-handle. Don Bradford should be standing somewhere near the door on the inside, she knew. That was his habit at about this hour.

Bradford opened the door to her rapping.

"Mrs. Parson!" he said. "Missed you tonight."

"I've lost my scarf, Don," she said. "I'm sure I had it when I was here. Where were you tonight? I didn't see you."

"My busy night, Thursday," he said. "Haven't been on the door much. Remember where you sat?" He held open the door.

"Regular place," she said as she entered and started down the aisle. "Bet I dropped it."

As she'd known he would, Bradford followed her down the aisle, holding a flashlight for her. She went directly to the fourth seat from the right aisle in the sixth row of the center section. There was no one sitting in the seats, and she twisted around, cutting off Bradford's light, and then bent over. From the hat rack beneath the seat she pulled her green-and-white scarf.

She turned around, displaying it, smiling. "Lucky," she whispered to him. "Right where I left it. Careless of me."

"Glad you found it," he said.

Together they walked back up the aisle. "Good show tonight," she said as they reached the lobby. "Enjoyed both features."

"I didn't get much chance to watch them," he said.

She glanced back at the screen. The last scene of the picture was coming on. It would be finished in three or four minutes.

She turned back to Bradford. "My car's been acting up," she said. "Mind driving me home?"

She saw the look of surprise in his eyes, and she also saw that he was pleased. She knew he was surprised that she would ask him to drive her home again, because, she suspected, he had a guilty feeling about the last time.

"It'll be a few minutes," he said.

"I'll wait for you," she said. "In the car in the lot."

During the drive to the cottage Scylla found herself tense. Yet she knew she did not have to be afraid of Don Bradford. He was acting and reacting exactly as she had calculated he would.

This time, as the other time, Bradford put the car in the garage, closed and locked the door, then came to where she stood waiting and extended the key to her. He was about to

say good night when she said, "You're coming in." It was a statement, not a command.

When he made a feeble protest that it was late, she said, "Come along," and turned to the steps. As she had known he would, he followed.

However, this time Bradford did not follow her into the kitchen. With a rigid properness he stood waiting for her to direct him. She waved toward the couch. "Relax," she said. "I'll fix us something. Ham on rye?"

He sat down stiffly. "That would be fine."

They ate their sandwiches and drank their coffee almost in silence. Unlike the other time, he did not seem to want to talk. He replied to her questions about his job at the theater, about the picture that evening, about his school, but he did not elaborate. She knew that he was trying very hard to keep everything polite and formal.

At the same time she knew that this was only a pretense. Beneath all the reserve, the politeness, the formality, she knew Don Bradford was a seething volcano.

"Tell me about your girls," she said. "You must have a lot of girl friends."

He grinned. "Just one, really," he said.

"Tell me about her. Is she pretty?"

"I think so."

"What's her name?"

"Betty. Elizabeth, that is. Elizabeth Simmons."

"In school?"

"She's quit. Working now. Said school wasn't important for girls. She wants to work and save what she can to help us when we get married."

"That's nice of her."

"Yes, it sure is. She's very smart. Got a raise the first month she worked. And she'd never worked before, either. She catches right on to things."

Scylla did not want him to talk too much about his girl Betty. She did not want him to get to thinking too much about her. She had brought it up to try to find some subject which would relax him. Because he was obviously a young man of high moral ideas, he was something of a puzzle to her. She had not dealt with many men of high moral sense.

But the fact that he was highly moral was to her advantage. That meant that she could have a still tighter hold on him. Her only problem now was not to be too anxious with him, not to frighten him away before he fell completely into her trap. She had to penetrate his moral shell slowly, then

suddenly break it wide open to reveal the raw tenderness of him behind it.

Since she could not lead him into the trap with conversation, she decided to use other means. "It's been a hard day for me," she said wearily. "Haven't done much, but somehow I'm tired."

"Me, too," he said. "Had a tough exam today. What that prof doesn't think of to ask just isn't in the books."

"I know that," she said, and got up from the couch. "We both need a drink."

"But I hardly . . ." he started to protest.

"Neither do I," she said. "But sometimes when I'm tense, a drink relaxes me. Have one with me, please"

"Well, I guess I will then," he said. "If you want one."

She started toward the kitchen. "Highball? Scotch or bourbon?"

"Bourbon and Seven-up is fine."

"Like Scotch myself," she smiled. "I'll mix them."

She mixed the two drinks quickly. Into his she put a double amount and into her own only enough to color the mix. She had never liked alcoholic drinks. She was afraid of them. She never wanted to allow anything to deaden her mind and senses.

Before Bradford had half-finished his drink, the effects began to show on him. He slouched down into the softness of the cushions on the couch, letting his long legs flop beneath the coffee table. And his tongue began to loosen. He began to find things to talk about, and he kept talking about them. When he had finished the drink, he asked permission to remove his coat.

She took the coat and hung it in the closet in the hallway. Then she mixed the second drink. She again served him a double amount, but into her own she poured some cold tea. When she returned to the living room, he had loosened his tie.

This was going to be easier and faster than she had thought. He obviously was not accustomed to alcohol and would soon be very drunk. She did not want him to get too drunk, just enough to be careless and a little bold.

He took a gulp of his drink, then said, "Guess we need some music. You have a record player?"

She was sorry she didn't. "How about the radio?"

She started to get up, but he was up first. "I'll get it." Carrying his drink, he went to the radio and turned it on. "KHJ has some late programs," he said as he adjusted the

dial. He listened for a moment to KHJ, then turned the dial again. "Need something livelier. See what's on KNX."

She watched him with studied amusement. He seemed to have forgotten about her entirely. He adjusted the radio several times and finally found the kind of music he wanted. He stood looking at the radio and sipping his drink for a moment. Gradually he began moving his shoulders and his feet to the music.

Then he gulped down the remainder of his drink, almost dropped the glass on the radio, and turned to her. "Let's dance."

He was across the room beside her before she could get up. "I don't know whether I can," she said as he pulled her into his arms and twirled her around fast.

Scylla was not a good dancer. She never had been, and she knew it. But Bradford didn't notice it. "Gee," he exclaimed as he spun her around again, "you're as light as a feather!" He drew her back into his arms with a jerk. "Lighter than Betty even."

When the music stopped and the commercial began, he hurried to the radio to find another station. He found the station, then picked up his glass, draining out the melted ice in it. "Looks like the well has gone dry," he laughed.

"I'll make another one," she said, and took the glass.

This time he followed her into the kitchen. "Say, what are you putting into those things? Kick like a mule."

She laughed with him and noticed the fine beads of perspiration appearing on his forehead. He noticed also and wiped his forehead on his shirt sleeve. "Nights sure getting warm lately," he said. "Unusual, too, for this time of year."

She put only one shot in his drink this time because she did not want him to drink too much more. She made a pretense of putting the same amount in her own glass but managed to spill most of it down the side of the glass without his noticing it. "Well, here's to you," she said as she handed him his drink.

"Here's to us," he corrected.

They danced again. This time she let her body come closer to his. She could feel the rising heat of him. When he let her go at the end of the number, he did not turn back to the radio for more music this time. Instead he grabbed his glass and emptied it.

He watched her across the room as she sat down on the couch. She fanned her face with her hand. "You're too fast for me," she said, and laughed.

He looked for a place to set his empty glass. He put it on the radio. He turned back to her and grinned like a little boy. "Say, mind if I use the bathroom? I gotta go."

"Through the hall," she pointed.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," he giggled as he went down the hall.

The time had come, she decided. She kicked off her shoes, propped the cushions against one end, and threw her slender legs up on the couch, allowing them to stretch out to their full, graceful length. They were, she thought, as nice legs as he'd ever have the chance at. The stupid young fool! She pulled her dress up until her nylon-covered knees began to show.

He came back into the living room, and she turned her head to smile at him. He reacted as she'd known he would. The wild gaiety was gone from his face now. Instead there was the wondering, doubtful, but hopeful look of the male who sees what he wants but wonders if he can have it. She turned her head back and waited.

Slowly he crossed the room and stood looking down at the length of her. She let her eyes meet his. "God, you're beautiful!" he breathed.

"Why, Donniel!" she said as though she were surprised.

"You are. Honest, you are." He dropped to his knees beside the couch, but he did not touch her.

"You've had too much to drink," she said.

"No," he said. "No, I've had enough to let me say what I think. I think you're the most beautiful woman in all the world."

She wished she could blush, but wondered if he would notice it if she could. "Why, what would Betty say?"

"I don't care," he said. "You're beautiful."

She breathed deeply, filling her lungs with air and pushing her great breasts upward. His want-filled eyes devoured them, then moved along the softness of her stomach to the lines of her thighs and down the length of her legs.

His hand reached out with a delicate trembling of the fingers until he touched her leg below the knee. "You've the most beautiful legs in all the world," he whispered. His hand caressed her leg and moved upward over her knee beneath the hem of her dress. She could feel its hot moistness through her stocking.

She waited until the hand slid above the top of her stocking and reached the soft whiteness of her thigh. Then she

suddenly slapped his hand away. "Donnie!" she said with indignation.

He stopped for a moment, but then his hand grabbed back, this time sinking into the flesh of her leg and burrowing higher. "I don't care," he cried. "I don't care. You're the most beautiful thing in all the world. You're everything. I love you! I love you!"

She made a pretense of pushing his hand away and kept her legs closed as his flushed, wanting face came down to meet hers. His eager, seeking lips found her mouth. And as he pressed down, she opened her lips to the fire of the kiss, but let him think he was forcing them apart.

So far as she was concerned, she would have liked to have had the business over and done with. She didn't mind letting him relieve himself. That was nothing to her. But she had to play a rôle. She had to make him think that he was conquering her, that he was taking something against her will. It was not a rôle which she enjoyed. She would rather have shown the inexperienced young man what to do and how to do it, with no need for pretense.

His lips left hers and traveled down to her neck and then to the valley of her breasts. His hands tore at the buttons along the front of her dress, trying to bare them.

"Stop, Donnie! Oh, stop!" she said, making it sound as if she were pleading.

"No, no," he said. "You must let me! I can't stop! I can't, I can't!"

She heaved in faked response as he ripped the front of her dress and broke the strap between the cups of her brassière to bare her breasts to his seeking lips. "Donnie, don't!" she said, but pressed his head closer to her. "Donnie, don't! Oh, Donnie, you're too strong for me. You're making me . . ."

With a mad fury he was attacking her body, unmindful of her faked pleas now. Without seeming to, she helped him remove her undergarments because she was afraid he would tear her clothes beyond repair. She hoped that the rip in her dress wasn't as bad as it had sounded.

As he plunged into the sea of her body, she watched him, as she had always watched, aware of how utterly helpless he was. But it was over almost at once. The bright demand of him exploded almost before she could make any false responses. And suddenly, instead of attacking her body, he was trying to pillow himself upon it.

"Please . . . please!" he said. "Can you ever forgive me?"

I shouldn't have . . . It was all my fault. I've taken advantage of you. Please say you'll forgive me . . . please!"

It was the way she had wanted him to feel and the way she had calculated he would feel. "It's . . . it's all right," she said because she knew that would make his remorse even greater. "I guess it just had to happen."

"My fault," he said. "I'm sorry . . . honest I am."

"Don't cry." She petted him. "It's all right. We'll just have to forget . . . and not let it get the better of us again."

Suddenly he jerked up, holding his weight on his hands over her. "But . . . but what if you get . . . I . . . I didn't use anything. . . ."

He was the completely vain male, and she wanted to laugh in his boyish face. "I don't know what . . . I must take care of myself. . . ." She pushed at him and got up quickly.

He helped her to her feet. "Gee . . . that would be . . ." he said. "And your dress. I tore it. Oh, I must have gone mad!"

"I'd better take care of myself now," she said. "You'd better go, Don. Don't worry about me. I'll manage." It was the tone of the self-sacrificing female talking now. "I'll be all right."

He stood there with a look of bewildered helplessness on his face. Can't I . . ."

"No, Donnie. You go on. Your classes tomorrow, remember?"

He took his coat and went out the door as she went toward the bathroom. When the front door slammed, she turned back and went to the window, where she could see him. She saw him standing at the foot of the steps, looking back up at the door to the house. He stared at the door for a moment, then turned and walked away. There was a swagger to his step as he disappeared into the dark.

She smiled.

CHAPTER X

Thoughts of the lifeless body of Milt Parson on the bedroom floor of the Willowbrook house were almost forgotten by Scylla then. She went into the bedroom, stripped off her torn clothing, and went into the bathroom. She bathed leisurely, soaking for a long time in the hot water of the tub.

Then she showered with cold water, loving the feel of the thousands of little needles of water on her body.

She slept nude — and soundly.

Scylla was awake early the next morning, a little earlier than usual. Not because she had not slept well, but because she had so many things to do. She could not be certain when Milt's body would be found and someone would notify her.

The most important thing she had to do was to decide what to do with the gun. She went down to the car and got her purse from behind the seat. Back in the house, she removed the gun and sat holding it as she tried to make up her mind.

She knew that trying to keep the gun was foolishly dangerous. But somehow the gun held a special meaning for her now, a fascination, and she did not want to throw it into the ocean as she had the unwanted cartridges.

Suddenly she thought of the wrinkled old pawnbroker on Cherry Street in Kansas City. The pawnshop was the safest place for the gun.

She wrapped the gun in plain wrapping paper and put it into an old cardboard box. She did not even remove the unused cartridges. She wrapped the box in more paper, then printed the pawnshop's address on it in bold letters unlike her usual writing.

But then she thought that it would not be wise for her to mail the package. She thought of having Don Bradford mail it for her, but she did not want to have Don around then. He might be there when the police came.

She pondered the problem for a few minutes. Then she drove to the meat market and bought a ham. She asked the butcher to bone the ham for her. While he was busy with the boning, she put the package on the scales. It surprised her to find that it weighed three pounds and two ounces.

As she paid for the meat, she asked the cashier for two dollars in dimes. "For my piggy bank," she explained with a laugh. "Not really mine, of course. The boy who lives across the street. His birthday."

She then went to the drugstore and fed the dimes into the stamp machine until she had fifty-one three-cent stamps. She tore off one and put it in her purse. The others she pasted to the package. It looked silly to have so many stamps on a package, but she didn't care about that. She dropped the package in the mailbox on the corner near the Shoreline Theater.

She was back at the cottage within twenty minutes. She

hoped that no one had tried to call her in that time. She felt sure no one had. In fact, she felt that now everything was done. She had now only to wait for the call which she knew was certain to come. She went into the kitchen and began preparing her breakfast.

At a little after ten o'clock there was a knock on the door. She saw the black-and-white police car in front as she went toward the door, and she was prepared.

When she opened the door, a uniformed officer said, "You Mrs. Parson?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Your husband is Milton Parson?" He looked at some notes on a card as she nodded. "Live at 9210 Willowbrook in L.A.?"

"Yes," she said, and let puzzlement come into her eyes and voice. "What . . ."

"We have a report," the officer went on, "that your husband has been injured."

Her hand went up to her neck in a gesture of shock. "Injured? But what do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Parson," he said apologetically, "but I might as well tell you now. He's dead."

She shrank back, and the officer stepped inside, ready to catch her if she fainted. She wished that she could faint. Instead she gasped, then said, "What happened to him?"

"Sorry, that's all we know, Mrs. Parson. If you'll come with us, we'll take you there."

"Why, yes, of course. But wait till I get my coat." She took off her apron and ran into the bedroom. "Could I call there? Can't you tell me what happened?"

"Best that we take you there," the officer said.

There were a dozen police cars, three newspaper station wagons, and an ambulance around the Willowbrook house when they arrived. A throng of people milled around on the sidewalk and in the street. Uniformed policemen were keeping them back from the house and directing traffic along the street. The traffic officers cleared a path for the police car carrying her.

A heavy-set man wearing a blue pin-stripe suit and smoking a cigarette in a holder came to meet the car. One of the officers opened the door for her and helped her out. "This is Mrs. Parson, Captain," he said to the man with the cigarette holder.

"I'm Captain Martin, Seventy-seventh Street Detectives," he introduced himself.

"What happened to Milt?" she asked.

"We're trying to find out, Mrs. Parson," he said kindly. "First we'd like you to identify the body. We only assume it's your husband. The hired man said it was, but we'd like the identification to come from you."

He took her arm, and she allowed him to lead her into the house. There were dozens of officers in the house, and newspapermen and photographers outside the house. Three photographers flashed pictures of her as she entered the door with Captain Martin.

"No more now, boys," Martin requested.

He led her through the living room, down the hall to the door of the bedroom. Milt Parson lay where she had left him the night before. She looked at him, gasped, reeled a little, and said, "It's him . . . Milt. . . ." She covered her face with a handkerchief and sobbed quietly into it.

Martin led her back into the living room, and photographers crowded in and took other pictures of her weeping. Then Martin said, "Probably you'd rather wait outside, Mrs. Parson."

She nodded her head.

"Smitty!" Martin called to a plain-clothes officer. "Take Mrs. Parson outside to my car. Stay with her. I'll let you know."

Scylla allowed herself to be led out of the house. The detective helped her into the back seat of the police car. Newspaper reporters crowded around the car, asking her questions, but she did not try to answer any of them.

"Better wait awhile," the detective told them.

The detective did not try to talk to her, and she sat with her head in her hands, waiting. It must have been an hour before she saw the ambulance attendants carry the body out in a wire basket carrier covered with a white sheet. They put the burden in the ambulance, and the ambulance drove away.

A little later Martin came back to the car. With him was a tall blond man. "This is Detective Lieutenant Grayson," Martin introduced the other man. "He'll be handling the case, Mrs. Parson."

Scylla looked at the man. His deep blue eyes and smooth-featured face showed nothing except a strange sort of rugged strength. She nodded and mumbled, "How do you do." To Martin she said, "What happened to Milt?"

"Murdered, Mrs. Parson," Martin stated. "No doubt about it."

"But who? Why?"

"That's our problem, Mrs. Parson. First we'd like you to check the house and tell us whether anything of value is missing."

She nodded as Martin opened the car door. Grayson reached out a hand and helped her out. His grip was firm on her arm, and she could feel the strength of him in the contact.

Martin and Grayson followed her as she went through the house, looking into each room, each closet, and each drawer. There was nothing missing, as she knew. She wondered if it would not have been wise to have removed something the night before, but she had not thought of it then. She noticed particularly the accumulation of dust and dirt over everything. She would be happy when she could get back into the house and give it a real cleaning again.

To the officers she said, "Nothing's gone that I can see."

"Did your husband keep any large sums of money around?" Grayson asked her. "Jewelry? Other valuables?"

"He never did," she said. "Not while I was here."

"While you were here." Grayson was repeating her words. "You weren't living here? We were wondering about that."

"I've been living at the beach for about a month," she said. "We'd talked about a divorce."

She saw the two officers exchange glances and wondered why neither of them said anything more about it.

"Bob," Martin addressed Grayson, "suppose you take Mrs. Parson to the station and take a statement from her. I'll stick around here until the other boys give the place a going-over and the BSI gets through. I want to talk to the hired man, too."

"Shall I bring her back here then?" Grayson asked.

"Not unless it's necessary."

She turned to the captain. "About the stock, the rabbits . . ."

"The hired man seems to be taking care of them. You'll have to make arrangements with him later. I'll tell him to see that everything's all right until you can talk with him."

"Thank you, Captain," she said.

Grayson motioned her toward the front door. They met a battery of reporters and photographers. While more pictures were being taken, the reporters asked questions.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm too . . . too shocked to know what to say. Will you please let me pull myself together?"

"Please, boys," Grayson said to them. "I'm taking Mrs. Parson to the station. Maybe afterward you can interview her."

She admired the way he spoke and the obvious respect the newsmen had for him. They dropped back, allowing them to cross the porch and go to the police car.

Grayson helped her into the front seat of the car, then got behind the wheel. Just as they were about to pull away, an elderly man ran up to the car.

"Mrs. Parson, Mrs. Parson!" he said. "Don't want to interrupt you. I was retained by Mr. Parson. I'll call you later." He shoved a card into her hand and stepped back. Grayson eased the car through the crowded street.

She looked at the card:

Jonathan Williamson, *Attorney*
Spring Arcade Building
Los Angeles 13, California
Telephone MAdison 4942

She could not imagine what the man meant by his having been retained by Milt. She put the card into her purse.

Grayson drove the car into the carport of the 77th Street Station, helped her out, and led her up the stairs to the second floor and down a hallway to a door marked "Detective Bureau." Inside, he asked her to wait on a bench and disappeared. A moment later he was back, and there was a thin, bespectacled girl with him.

"This is Miss Morris, our stenographer," Grayson introduced her. "Now if you'll come in here, Mrs. Parson."

He led her into a small office and asked her to take a chair in front of a small desk. He closed the door, then sat down at the desk. Miss Morris took her place at a corner of the desk and opened her notebook.

"You understand, Mrs. Parson, that we have to take down a statement from everyone who has any information whatever concerning a crime. After Miss Morris has typed up the statement, you may read it and correct anything you want to in it, and then we'll ask you to sign it. This is for our records."

"I understand, Lieutenant," she said. "Anything I can tell you, I want to tell you."

"That's fine, Mrs. Parson. We appreciate it. Now we'll begin. What is your name?"

He asked the routine questions as to age, residence, marital status, how long she had been married, where and when, how long she had lived at the Willowbrook address, how long at the Seal Beach cottage.

"When did you last see your husband alive?"

"It was last week, I think. I don't remember the exact day."

"About the divorce — when did this come up?"

"Well, I can't rightly say it was a divorce. Separation really, although we had discussed a divorce. We decided to live apart for a while."

"What was the reason for this?"

"Well, everything, I guess. And then not anything. I think maybe we both worked too hard with the business and all."

"What were the reasons on the surface? Money?"

"Oh, no, there was never any question about that. We had joint accounts, and we each took what we wanted. Never anything like that at all."

"Mr. Parson drink?"

"Never did."

"You quarrel?"

"Like all married couples."

"Ever fight? He ever strike you or you him?"

"Milt would never do a thing like that."

"He run around? Women?"

"I never was certain. I thought it at times."

"Any particular woman?"

"I never knew of any."

"Then why did you think there was another woman?"

"I don't know. Just a woman's intuition, I guess."

"Who were the people who disliked him?"

"I thought almost everybody liked Milt."

"His business associates?"

"He always treated everybody fair, I'm sure."

"Who do you think might have killed him?"

"I just don't know. I don't think anyone would."

"What did you do at the beach house?"

"Just lived there."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"What time did you get up this morning?"

"About six, I think. I usually get up early."

"When did you go to bed?"

Scylla knew what he was leading up to, and she was prepared. "Let's see, I went to the late show, so it must have been around one, maybe later."

"What show?"

"In Seal Beach. The Shoreline."

"What pictures did you see?"

"There were two of them. One was 'The Lost Week End,' and the other was 'Mildred Pierce.'"

He waited, looking directly at her.

"You know, the one with the man drinking all the time. And the one with Joan Crawford."

"What time did you go to the show?"

"Well, I usually go right after supper. Must have been six o'clock. About then."

"When did you leave the show?"

"I saw one of the pictures twice, most of it. I left just before midnight."

"Go to the movies often?"

"All the time. There's nothing else to do."

Grayson paused, took out a cigarette, and offered her one. She thanked him. He lighted both, then sat half-turned from her, looking out the window. She waited for him to turn back to her.

"You own a gun?"

"Never have."

"Mr. Parson have any guns?"

"We never had a gun on the place, except an air rifle he used to shoot birds with when they bothered the rabbit feed."

He turned back to the window. Then he crushed out the cigarette. "Anything you want to add to this statement? Anything at all you can think of that might help us?"

She twisted the handkerchief with which she had been dabbing her eyes, and said, "I can't think of anything, Lieutenant."

Then he asked her the other routine questions. "This statement has been made of your own free will?"

She looked at him.

He explained, "The regular questions."

And then she said, "Yes."

"No violence or threats of violence have been used to induce you to make this statement?"

"No, none at all."

"No promises of immunity have been made?"

"No."

"The answers you have given are the truth to the best of your knowledge and belief?"

"Yes, they are."

He stood up. "Let's get this typed up, Miss Morris." He turned to Scylla as Miss Morris was leaving the room. "Excuse me a moment." He also left the room.

Scylla could not help smiling when she was alone in the room. She was proud of herself for the way she had acted and the way she had answered the questions. And she was

pleased that a man like Grayson was going to handle the case. He was not going to be difficult to handle at all. He was almost too polite and gentlemanly, and he was altogether different from all other police officers she had come in contact with and from the movie version of cops she had seen so many times.

Grayson came back into the room. "We won't need to wait for the statement to be typed. I'll bring it to you later. Would you like to go back to the Willowbrook place or to your Seal Beach place?"

She shuddered slightly. "I don't like to think of going back there . . . to the Willowbrook place. But I guess I must. I'll have to get someone to look after things."

"Someone should," Grayson nodded. "I'll take you. The newspapermen are outside. Would you like to give them a statement?"

She told him that there was nothing she had to say. She didn't know how to talk to newspaper people. "What I've told you is all I know. Couldn't you tell them what I told you?"

"I could," he said. "They'd probably rather hear it from you, but I understand how you feel."

In the outer room she dry-sobbed into her handkerchief while more pictures of her were taken. She wished she knew how to make real tears flow. She told the reporters that all she knew had already been told to Lieutenant Grayson.

"I'm just too stunned to say anything. My husband was such a wonderful man."

CHAPTER XI

It was nearly one o'clock as they started back to the house, and Grayson asked her if she would like to get something to eat. She told him that she was too upset to eat anything, but when he said she should eat if possible, she agreed to have a sandwich. He stopped at a drive-in, and they had a sandwich and coffee sitting in the police car.

Grayson did not talk about the case at all. Instead he tried to talk about baseball. He liked the Cleveland Indians in the American League and conceded that the Hollywood Stars would probably win the Pacific Coast League, but he wished the Los Angeles Angels would win.

She knew nothing about baseball and could not discuss the

teams with him. She wondered if he was simply trying to get her mind off the case or whether he was more interested in sports than in detective work. She hoped it was the latter. She also wondered if he wasn't trying to impress her, but she could find nothing in his manner and conversation which definitely indicated that. When she asked him how long he had been a police officer, he merely answered that he had been on the force for twelve years, and then he switched the conversation to his wife and two children and the house he was building for them.

She knew nothing whatever about sports and could not talk about them. She knew nothing, either, about children, but she could talk about them. She knew more about houses and told him that there were a lot of problems to building. She found herself enjoying the conversation and almost forgot Milt and the Willowbrook house.

When they arrived, Martin and half a dozen officers were still there. Martin refused to let her enter the house, explaining that the experts from the Bureau of Scientific Investigation were making a detailed examination of everything.

"May take a couple of days to complete everything, Mrs. Parson," he said. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to keep the house locked until we're through."

"I understand, Captain," she said. "There's nothing in there I need. But would you see that there's no food left out that might spoil? I don't know how Mr. Parson has been having his meals lately."

"We'll do that, Mrs. Parson."

"I wanted to see about the rabbits, too."

"Yes, you should. I'll get the hired man for you."

The hired man was a squat, dark-complexioned man named Manuel Garcia. He said he had been working for Milt for three weeks. After talking with him, Scylla recognized that he knew all about the care and feeding of rabbits, and she instructed him to do whatever was necessary.

Garcia said there was still some butchering to do for the week-end customers and that he could attend to it with a little help. He had a son who could help him, and Scylla told him to get his boy and that she would pay him. She did not want to lose out on any trade if it wasn't necessary.

There was nothing else she could do at the place, and Grayson suggested that she go back to Seal Beach and wait until she heard from them. He made a note of the address and the telephone number, then assigned a uniformed officer

to drive her there. She was a little disappointed that he did not take her back there himself.

On the way Scylla tried to straighten out in her mind all the things she had to do. It was almost three o'clock by the time she was back at the cottage, too late to do anything about the various bank accounts and the cash in them, and the safe-deposit boxes where deeds and other documents were kept. There was the matter of the funeral arrangements, and she decided that as soon as she was notified by the police, she would call a mortuary and turn all those details over to them. She wanted Milt to be cremated. There was no need for a funeral since there was no immediate family concerned.

She was not sure what had to be done about the real estate to have the titles transferred to her name in the settlement of Milt's estate. She went through the yellow pages of the phone book and picked out the name of Norman Parker, attorney at law, in the Jergins Building in Long Beach. One attorney was as good as another so far as she knew. She wanted someone who knew the law, but who would know only what she told him about their affairs.

She called Parker's number and talked to him. She told him the situation and asked him to come out and discuss it with her. She explained that she could not leave the cottage because she was waiting to hear from the police. Parker said he would be out within an hour.

Parker was a young attorney, which pleased her, although his premature baldness gave him the appearance of being much older than he was. He had recently opened his own office after working since graduation for a law firm in which he had handled estates.

"If all your cash accounts in the banks and all your safe-deposit boxes are in your joint names with rights of survivorship, all you have to do is withdraw the money," he explained. "If your property deeds are the same, then it's only a matter of certifying the death of your husband and obtaining full title in your name."

This was all much simpler than she had expected. "Then I'd like to have you handle it for me," she told him.

He asked her for a retainer fee of one thousand dollars and said that he would draw up the necessary papers over the week end and have them ready for her to sign on Monday morning. She wrote him out a check for the fee.

Although Scylla did not like having to part with a thousand dollars, she did not want it to appear to him that she

was miserly. She would rather at that time have him think she was an easy touch.

Parker had been gone only a few minutes when the telephone rang. It was Grayson.

"I just wanted to let you know that we can release the body," he said. "Is there anything we can do to help you with the arrangements?"

She was impressed with the helpfulness of the police and thanked him. "I don't know what. I'll have to get a mortuary to take charge."

"Very well, Mrs. Parson. As you wish," he said. "The autopsy has been completed, and we have no further reason for holding the body."

"What . . . Is there anything you can tell me about . . ." She didn't want to ask directly.

"He was killed by a thirty-eight-caliber weapon. We have recovered the slug. It's slightly damaged but not too much to prevent our identifying the gun from which it came."

"That's all you know?" She was glad then that she had sent the gun back to the Kansas City pawnbroker.

"Practically everything," he said. "He was killed before midnight, the autopsy surgeon estimates. We have no further information of importance."

"It just doesn't seem possible," she said, putting a slight sob in her voice. "Is there anything I should do at all?"

"Nothing just now," he told her. "You'll be at this number if we need you?"

"Yes, I'll stay here," she promised. "Unless I go out for something."

"We'll be finished with the house tomorrow, too. Your hired man seems to know what to do there."

"I'm glad to know that," she said. "Thank you for being so kind, Lieutenant."

When Grayson hung up, she immediately called the Long Beach office of Utter McKinley Mortuary and asked them to send someone out with regard to making the arrangements for disposing of Milt's body. When the man arrived, she told him that she wished the body cremated and the ashes disposed of without a formal funeral. The man said they would take full charge, but suggested that she might want to dispose of the ashes herself.

The mortuary representative had hardly gotten out of the door when the telephone rang again. "Scylla . . . Scylla . . ." a voice charged with emotion said. She did not immediately recognize it. "I just saw it in the papers. Scylla, it must be

awful for you. I'm coming right over. I can't work tonight. I . . . I . . ."

By this time she had recognized the voice. It was Don Bradford. She wanted to laugh at his high emotional state. She did not wish to see him.

"Thank you, Donnie," she said, "but I'm too upset."

"I know, Scylla — you don't mind my calling you that — not now, anyway? I know how awful it must be. You need me now. You need comfort."

She could hardly hold back the laughter now. "You're very nice, Donnie, but really I feel I must be alone. I can't see anyone."

"Isn't there something I can do? Anything?"

"No, Donnie, there's nothing anyone can do. I must readjust my life now."

"And I want to help you, Scylla. You must know — after last night — how much I love you."

It was too ridiculous, she thought, but she also thought that if Bradford got any crazy ideas, it might upset her whole scheme. She had to keep him at a distance but do it without injuring his masculine pride.

"You can help me, Donnie," she said. "The police have questioned me. They may think I had something to do with it."

"You? How can they think a thing like that? It's crazy."

"I know, Donnie. But then they have to think of everyone. It's their duty."

"But I know you didn't," he said. "Not only because of the kind of person you are, but I know where you were. The paper said it happened before midnight or about that time. I can tell them, Scylla, where you were. I was with you."

"I'm glad, Donnie, that you were here. Not because of what you could tell them, but glad because of the other, too."

"Scylla, I'm coming over. You need me at a time like this. I want to stand by you."

"It would be better, Donnie, if the police didn't know about the other between us. They might think you were saying I was at the show because of the other thing. Don't you see, Donnie, it would be better for me — for both of us — if no one knew but us, and if we stayed away from each other until this is cleared up?"

"Yes, I guess you're right, Scylla. But it'll be hard for me. You know how I feel, don't you?"

"Yes, Donnie, I know. And let's not spoil it now."

"But you'll call me if you need me?"

"Yes, Donnie, I'll call."

Don Bradford, she suspected then, might become a bigger problem than she had estimated. However, she was sure she could handle him. For the time being it was good for her purpose to have him thinking as he was.

CHAPTER XII

The next day, Saturday morning, the body of Milt Parson was reduced to ashes. Scylla drove to Los Angeles, paid the bill, and took the little urn of ashes. She didn't know quite what to do with them, but she knew she'd have to take them to keep everything looking right.

Because she did not know what to do with the ashes and not even with herself, she didn't drive directly back to Seal Beach. She took the long way around. She drove out through Hollywood, following the full length of Hollywood Boulevard and noticing the changes which had been made since she had last been along the street. Then she went on through Beverly Hills. She idled through the picture-book homes of Beverly Hills and let her mind play with the idea that she could now afford one of these places if she wanted it, even one with a winding staircase and a swimming pool. She speculated on how surprised Samuel J. Peterson would be if he ever saw her in such a house — the kind of house he had once led her to think she could have, but one which she had gotten with no help from him.

She drove on down through Santa Monica, then through Ocean Park and to Venice. Without thinking about it, she parked on Breeze Street and walked down on the pier to find something to eat. She was eating a sea-food dinner before she remembered that this was the same place where she had once eaten with Peterson.

From Venice she wandered leisurely through El Segundo, Manhattan Beach, and Redondo Beach. She took the Palos Verdes Drive and followed the edge of the ocean on around to Point Fermin and came in through San Pedro and the harbor area. Finally she reached Long Beach and then went on to Seal Beach. By the time she was back at the cottage, the sun had dropped into the Pacific Ocean.

Scylla walked out on the sandy strip in front of her cottage and stood watching the vanishing glow of the sun and listen-

ing to the receding surf until she stood alone in the complete dark, holding the urn of Milt's ashes in her hands.

She went into the cottage and tried to amuse herself by cleaning the kitchen, but somehow she didn't want to clean the house. She kept wondering what she would do with the urn.

Restless and undecided, Scylla kept hearing the lessening sounds of the surf. She went to the door to look questioningly into the night, as if to ask the sea why it was quiet and still. The surf was now far out. A soft, warm breeze wafted off the water, and far out she could see the rising edge of the moon.

There was something about it all which stirred Scylla, and she wanted to walk out into the night and become a part of it. And then, as if she had always known, she knew what she would do with Milt's ashes. She would give him a final burial far more fitting than all the funerals of all the professional burial concerns. She would return to the restless depth of the sea the ashes of man who had once crawled from it and tried to find his existence on arid land.

Scylla knotted the green-and-white scarf around her reddish hair, picked up the urn, and walked slowly out past the three great rocks which stuck out from the sandy beach to the edge of the water. She kicked off her shoes and walked out into the water. She walked out until she could feel the water tugging at the hem of her dress where the breeze pressed it against her slender legs. Then she raised the lid of the urn and dumped the contents into the water.

The moon, climbing fast now, silhouetted her figure and the raised urn, extended at arm's length farther out over the water. Even after the ashes had fallen into the water and were being lost in the ripples as they moved seaward, she stood there holding the upturned urn. Finally she opened her hand, and the urn itself plumped into the water, floating for a moment before it filled with a gurgling sound and also disappeared.

It was over, done with. She had been as kind to Milt Parson as she knew how to be. She had released him from all the worries and struggles of life and had given him a proper farewell. From this moment on she would forever forget him and the stupid fool he had been.

Slowly Scylla backed out of the water until she stood on the damp beach. But somehow she did not want to leave the sea yet. She wanted to be with it, to hear its sounds, smell its smells. Yet she wanted some anchorage against the

restless water, wanted to feel the firmness of land. The sand beneath her bare feet was too uncertain, pulled as it was by every tide.

The only things which remained firmly in one place on the beach were the three huge boulders. Scylla walked over to them and leaned against the center one. How long she stood there she didn't know, for time was now meaningless. But slowly she was conscious of the weariness of her body. She dropped down and stretched out full length on the sand. As she tried to relax, she felt the restriction of her clothes. She was completely shielded in the V of the three giant boulders. The beach was private, and there was hardly a chance of anyone coming along. She stood up again and freed her body of the clothing. She retied the green-and-white scarf around her head to protect her hair from the sand. Then she stretched full length on the moist sand and began to relax completely.

Suddenly Scylla's peace and quiet was shocked by the sound of a man clearing his throat. She turned her head and saw the figure of the man outlined in the moonlight.

It was Lieutenant Grayson, and he had seen her. He was looking at her, she was sure, but pretending not to see her.

She knew he must like what he saw, as other men had always liked her body. And it struck her that it might be useful to her to allow him a good look. She lay perfectly still but watched him all the time. She let him cough twice more before she pretended to be startled and sat up and scrambled to cover herself.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry," Grayson's voice said. "It's Lieutenant Grayson, Mrs. Parson. Didn't mean to frighten you."

She said, "Oh!" again, ducked behind the rock from his view, and began pulling on her clothes.

"Hate to disturb you, Mrs. Parson," he kept apologizing. "We thought we should talk with you again. Saw the tracks on the beach and followed them."

She did not answer him directly, but kept making sounds to indicate that she was terribly embarrassed. He tried to make a joke of it by saying, "Some people sun-bathe and some moon-bathe, I guess."

She came from behind the rock. "I like the moon better. Sorry I wasn't at the house. What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to talk with you again," he said as they started toward the house. "Captain Martin's here. We brought the statement for you to sign, and we wanted to ask some more questions. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, Lieutenant." Her long strides led him across the sand.

Captain Martin and Miss Morris were waiting on the steps. "Everybody in the police work all the time?" she greeted them.

"Seems like it to us." Martin nodded and removed his hat. Miss Morris smiled. "When we have things to do, we keep at them."

Inside, she asked them to sit down, indicating the couch. Martin sat down on the couch, but Grayson took one of the easy chairs across from it. Miss Morris took a straight chair, saying she preferred it to sit in while taking notes. This left only the other easy chair for Scylla to sit in, but left her in a position that made it necessary for her to turn back and forth between Martin and Grayson. She removed the green-and-white scarf and laid it on the end table.

Martin took a sheaf of typewritten papers from his inside coat pocket. "We've got the statement here which you gave Lieutenant Grayson. You can read it and check it before you sign it. However, we'd like to ask a few other things."

"Whatever you wish, Captain," she said.

"We've checked a good many of the things you told us," Grayson said as she turned toward him. "You understand, Mrs. Parson, that we have to eliminate every person concerned with a crime."

"I understand," she said.

"Everything we've checked about your statement has been perfectly in order," he went on. "However, we want to cover every detail."

"Of course," she said.

"Now we've pretty well established that Mr. Parson was murdered at approximately ten o'clock, ten-ten to be exact."

"Oh," she said with an exclamation of surprise. As a matter of fact, she was surprised at the accuracy and wondered how they knew.

He went on explaining it. "A man living directly back of your place went out to lock his garage at that time. He heard what he thought was a shot. But there was a Pacific Electric train going by at that time, and he thought it was something from the train. He paid no attention to it until we questioned him."

"That's good," she said. She meant that it was good that the man had not investigated the shot at the time, but it sounded as if she meant it was good that they had established the time of the shot.

"Yes, it helps us a lot. It means that we can eliminate everyone who was at some other place at that particular time."

"I see," she said, trying to impress him with her desire to understand.

"Now your statement clears you," he said, and she almost smiled at him. "If you were at the Shoreline Theater in Seal Beach at that time, you certainly could not have killed your husband in Los Angeles."

"You have to suspect me, don't you?"

"We suspect everybody but accuse no one in a crime until we have proof," he said. "And we're as interested in clearing the suspicion from an innocent person as we are in accusing a guilty one."

"That's the way it should be," she said.

"Of course. Now in your case all we need is some proof that you were at the Shoreline at that time."

"Well . . . well, what can I tell you? I was there — that's all I can say." She was not ready yet to reveal her positive proof. She did not want to be too anxious or too exact.

"You go there often?"

"Quite often."

"Then you think some of the employees know you?"

"I suppose some of them might," she said. "They see me enough."

"You said, I believe, that you saw two pictures. Was there a newsreel or short?"

"Seems like there was a newsreel."

"What was it about?"

"I never pay much attention to them. Let's see, I remember there was something about some soldiers returning to San Francisco."

"What about the feature pictures?"

"They were both good, in a way. The one about Joan Crawford — Mildred Pierce was her name in the picture — was very sad. It was about a mother and what she'll do for her children. She was a foolish woman to do those things. And the girl, her daughter, didn't appreciate her."

"Who was the daughter?"

"I don't remember now who she was. But she was good in the part, only I didn't like her."

"And the other picture? Tell me about it."

"With Ray Milland? That was 'The Lost Week End.' He was an alcoholic, and he went off on a terrible drunk. Jane Wyman — she's always so good in parts — was his wife. He

went off to this room, and he saw a bat. There really wasn't one, but he thought it was real. Then a mouse came out of a hole in the wall and killed the bat. There was blood on the wall. Not really, but that's what he thought."

"Good picture?"

"I liked it. Saw part of it twice. But I don't see how anyone could really drink that much. What makes people drink like that?"

Grayson was looking out of the window. "People do some strange things. Very strange things. In fact, people are strange things themselves."

"I guess maybe they are," Scylla said.

Grayson leaned back in his chair. She glanced at Martin. He was sitting with his eyes closed. Miss Morris was just staring at her notebook waiting for them to go on.

"No doubt," Grayson said, "that you saw the pictures."

"Yes, I did," she said, and wondered if he was going to be satisfied with what she had said or if he would demand further proof. If he did, she was ready to give it to him.

"Of course, both pictures have been playing at other theaters in this area. So you could have seen them at other places."

"But I saw them at the Shoreliné."

He shook his head. "How can you prove that?"

"I don't know." She still wasn't ready to play her trump card.

"What dress did you wear? How were you dressed that night?"

"I wore my yellow dress," she said, and then she suddenly remembered that she could not show that dress to him if he asked to see it because it was the one which Don Bradford had torn down the front. So she said, "I think I did. Maybe I didn't. Maybe it was the black one."

"Wear a coat and hat?"

"My brown coat," she said. "No hat. I wore that scarf there" — she pointed to the green-and-white scarf — "around my head. I like that one."

He was nodding his head as she talked. And she decided that now was the time. "Oh, I remember now. I lost that scarf in the show and had to go back in and get it."

"Interesting," he said. "Someone find it for you?"

"No, I found it. I'd stuck it in the hatrack under the seat. I walked out and got almost home before I remembered it. I went back, and it was still where I'd left it."

"Buy another ticket to get back in?"

"Oh, no. The show was almost over, so they weren't selling tickets. The doors were locked. I knocked on the door, and they let me in, and I went down and got the scarf."

"Who let you in?"

"The young fellow who works there. Bradford is his name, I think."

"That's the sort of information we want, Mrs. Parson. Things we can check. This man will remember you?"

"I'm sure he will. He went down the aisle with me with his flashlight. I didn't think about him until now."

Grayson turned to Martin. "Anything you want to ask, Captain?"

"You've covered it." Martin opened his eyes. "We can check this easily enough. Seems this about clears up everything so far as Mrs. Parson is concerned. I hope you understand why we have to ask all these questions, Mrs. Parson."

"It's all right. I want to help all I can."

He gave her the first statement, and she read it quickly and signed it.

"We'll have this one typed, and you can check and sign it later if that's all right with you, Mrs. Parson."

"Whatever you wish," she said.

CHAPTER XIII

Monday was a busy day for Scylla. There were so many things she had to do. First she went to Parker's office in the Jergins Building in Long Beach and signed the power of attorney so he could begin arranging for the transfer of the properties from the joint names of herself and Milt to her own. She told him that all the deeds were in a safe-deposit box at the Security-First National Bank's branch in the Willowbrook section and that she would collect them and bring them to him.

She went to the Willowbrook house and discussed the continued care of the rabbits with Garcia. Since he seemed a capable man and knew the regular customers, she instructed him to continue with the business until she had time to make permanent arrangements. She instructed him to deposit all money he collected in the bank to her account and to have the bills mailed to her at the Seal Beach address.

She went into the house. The dirt made her angry. Milt

obviously had done little cleaning, and the police officers and other officials milling through the house had made a mess of everything. She wanted to get at the cleaning of it right then, but she knew she had to attend to the business affairs first.

In the bedroom she found a strange powder over everything, and she guessed that was what they used when they were searching for fingerprints. The bed had been torn apart and left in a rumpled heap. The blood where Milt had fallen was caked in a brownish stain on the rug. It was a shame, she thought, that the rug was soiled beyond further use.

She called Garcia into the house and told him to remove the rug from the room. "Burn it," she instructed him. "I'll be back tomorrow or the next day and get at cleaning things up."

She next went to the bank and entered the safe-deposit vault. She took out all the documents which she thought Parker might need, including a five-thousand-dollar insurance policy which Milt had carried with the Occidental Life Insurance Company and which named her beneficiary. Then she went to a teller and asked him for a statement of both the checking account and the savings account, explaining that she wished to transfer the money to an account under her own name.

According to Scylla's check stubs and her deposit book for the savings account there was \$3,892.12 in the checking account and an even \$4,000.00 in the savings account. She had not touched either account for more than six weeks having used the Seal Beach bank for her personal needs.

When the teller told her that the balance of the savings account was \$2,000.00 and that there was exactly \$1,946.06 in the checking account, she could not believe him. She asked him to check again. He did and confirmed the amounts. She turned a little white then as she realized that exactly one half of each account had been withdrawn.

"The last withdrawals," said the teller, "were made on the tenth."

She trembled slightly, hoping the teller did not notice, for something told her that Milt Parson had tricked her.

"May I see the last checks, please?"

"Certainly," the teller said, and went to get them.

What she had feared, what she already knew but could hardly believe, was true. Milt had written a check for \$1,946.06 made out to Cash on the tenth and had withdrawn \$2,000.00 from the savings account at the same time.

"The dirty son of a bitch," she said under her breath. She knew there was no point in asking the teller why Milt had withdrawn the money because he either would not know or could not tell her if he did.

She signed checks for the total amounts of each account and said, "I'll take the cash."

"You're not going to redeposit it?"

"No," she said. "Give me the cash." She was too angry to explain that she wanted her money and would put it where no one could get it from her.

At the Bank of America, where there were other accounts, she found exactly the same thing. And also at the Bank of California and at the Compton National Bank. Milt Parson had taken his half of each amount. Not only was Scylla infuriated, but she wondered what Milt had done with the money, nearly eleven thousand dollars in all.

She hurried back to Parker's office, gave him the deeds, and told him what she had found. "Of course, Mrs. Parson, he would have a full legal right to do that," Parker said.

"What did he do with it?" she demanded angrily. "That's what you have to find out. He didn't spend it."

"I couldn't say, of course, what he did with it. If he put it in the bank under his own name, then you'll have to claim it as his heir. I believe you said he had no other relatives?"

"None," she said. "At least that's what he always told me." She wondered then if maybe Milt had kept something from her all these years. And she thought that possibly he had kept the money in cash, hiding it at the Willowbrook place. She would have to find the money as soon as possible.

She drove back to the Willowbrook house as fast as she dared. She went through the house piece by piece, then searched the yards, the sheds, and the rabbitry area. But she found no sign of any concealed money. She asked Garcia if Milt had said anything to him about having any money around.

"Not a thing, Mrs. Parson," he told her. "He never talked money to me."

She considered that Garcia might have known about the money and stolen it, but she could not accuse him.

As she drove back to Seal Beach, she cursed Milt Parson a thousand times, even though she knew her curses were in vain. Milt was dead. In his last defiance of her he had taken one half of what he claimed was his, and she could not now

do anything about it. Not until she found what he had done with the money.

There was a strange car parked near the cottage but she did not pay any attention to it. She had her own car in the garage and was going up the steps when she saw the bony, elderly man get out of the car and come toward the house. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but she couldn't place him until he started up the steps as she waited at the door. She remembered then he was the lawyer she had seen the morning Milt's body had been found.

"Good evening, Mrs. Parson," he said. "Remember me? Jonathan Williamson." He was carrying a brief case.

"Oh, yes," she said.

"Been waiting for you. Tried to get you on the phone all day. Guess you were out."

"Yes, I've been very busy."

"That's what I came to talk to you about."

He was at the top of the steps, and she unlocked the door, and they went inside.

"Sit down," she said. He sat on the couch, and she took off her coat, then took the easy chair.

"I represent Mr. Parson," Williamson said. "He retained me a few weeks ago."

"I didn't know he needed an attorney," she said.

"He felt he did, Mrs. Parson. I have been handling some matters for him. Now that Mr. Parson isn't here, I have been authorized by his beneficiary to represent him — the beneficiary, that is."

"I have not employed you," she said.

"I know, Mrs. Parson."

"I am Mr. Parson's beneficiary."

"Not quite, Mrs. Parson."

Anger flared in her eyes. What was this man telling her? Who was he, and what was he doing in this affair? "Who sent you here?" she demanded.

"My client, Mrs. Parson. Please do not be disturbed unduly. What I have to say is a delicate matter and I suspect you will be surprised, if not a little shocked." There was a strange grin on his skinny face.

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard of you. I have no use for an attorney. I already have one. I . . ."

"That will make matters easier probably," he said. "Could you tell me who is your attorney?"

"Norman Parker," she said. "In the Jergins Building in Long Beach."

"Oh, yes, I have heard of Mr. Parker. A very capable young man, I understand."

"What's all this to you?"

"To me only a fee for doing a job, Mrs. Parson. It is something more to my client and, I might say, possibly something less to you."

She stood up. "Look, Mr. Williamson, I don't understand your talk, but I don't like it and your attitude. If you have anything important to say, I wish you'd say it and then leave."

"It's important, Mrs. Parson, quite important — and to you."

"Well . . ." She walked slowly back and forth across the room.

"You see, Mr. Parson did a very unusual thing. Most unusual, in fact."

"Well . . ."

"Mr. Parson came to me and explained that you and he were contemplating a divorce and that there was a difference between you concerning the division of the properties."

"I can't say there was," she said, "but go on."

"Mr. Parson told me that he wanted everything to be divided equally."

"He did," she said.

"Now Mr. Parson expressed to me some concern over the equal division of the properties. I explained to him that if you obtained a divorce, the division of the properties was a matter for agreement between the two of you, with the approval of the court, or a matter for the court to decide."

"I understand that." She stopped walking and stared at him.

"Well, Mr. Parson wanted to be sure. Not sure that he got one half, but sure that you received only one half."

"I don't see the difference."

"Considerable, Mrs. Parson. In a court case anything might happen. But until there was a court case one half of all community property was Mr. Parson's. Therefore until a suit was filed, he had full legal right to dispose of his one half in any manner he considered fit. And so Mr. Parson made a disposition of his one half."

"I don't believe you." Her voice was raised. "How could he do that?"

"Simply by doing it, Mrs. Parson. Mr. Parson withdrew one half of all bank accounts. And then he deeded one half interest in all real properties to another person. So when Mr.

Parson died, he had no estate at all, not even any community property. A very unusual situation, I must say."

Scylla felt for the chair behind her and let herself down into it. She was trembling all over.

"I . . . I . . ."

"I can understand that this may come as a considerable shock to you, Mrs. Parson. But I want you to know that it does not affect your one half interest in things. It just means that now you and the other party are joint owners of the properties."

"Who . . . who . . ."

"Mr. Parson deeded all properties to one Samuel J. Peterson," he said. "You and Mr. Peterson are now the joint owners of the properties."

Scylla could not speak.

Williamson went on. "Further, Mr. Parson changed the beneficiary of his life insurance policy to Mr. Peterson. He could not locate the actual policy, but the change has been duly made and recorded with the Occidental Life Insurance Company of Los Angeles."

Milt had not forgotten anything.

Williamson reached into his brief case. "Now I have here a cablegram from Mr. Peterson. He's in Europe at the moment. He has authorized me to represent him in these matters until he returns in about a week or two. Now if you prefer, I'll consult with your Mr. Parker concerning arrangements until I receive further instructions from my client." He stood up. "Mr. Peterson will probably get in touch with you and you with him. I believe Mr. Peterson can best be reached at his Beverly Hills residence. It's 412 North Bixley Drive."

Scylla had heard more than she could stand. She wanted this skinny-faced old man to get out and leave her alone. "Get out," she said to him without looking at him.

"Yes, Mrs. Parson," he bowed. "Good day to you."

Scylla sat repeating and repeating, "You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch." She had killed Milt Parson to keep from giving him one half of the properties. And now she didn't have them. The whole thing had been in vain. She had never suspected that Milt Parson hated her so much. She had always been sure that he loved her. She had never suspected that he could be so stubborn to a purpose. She had always considered him easy to handle.

Even more puzzling than Milt's act was why he had given the properties to Samuel J. Peterson. How had he known

Peterson? And what was the quirk of fate which had brought back the potbellied little man with his long cigar into her life? Although she had not asked, she knew that it was the Samuel J. Peterson who had picked her up out of El Paso and left her in a Venice hotel eight years before.

She heard Williamson's car pulling away. She got up and went into the kitchen and got the bottle of Scotch from the cupboard. It was almost full. She removed the cap and turned the bottle up and let the Scotch burn down her throat. She took a sip of water to cool the raw line it made in her throat, and then she drank again from the bottle. For the first time in her life she wanted to escape everything in the stupor of alcohol.

CHAPTER XIV

The next thing Scylla knew was the aching roar in her head and the ugly taste in her mouth. Painfully she opened her eyes and gradually saw the soft light creeping into the room. Then she knew she was in her own bed and that she was naked. Her mouth was so dry she could hardly breathe and her throat so raw she could hardly swallow.

Slowly she became conscious of the sag at the edge of the bed, and then she suddenly sat upright, the cover dropping from her breasts. At first she could not focus on the form of the man sitting on the edge of the bed. Then he did come into focus.

"Don!"

"It's all right," he said, and put out his hands and tried to lay her back. "Lie down. Everything's all right."

She pushed his hands away. "What are you . . ." Her mouth was too parched to speak.

"I came after the show. You were in there on the floor. I brought you in here and put you to bed."

"What time . . ."

"Six. Little after."

"You've been . . ."

He nodded. "I couldn't leave you. I had to wait to see that you were all right. Would you like some juice? Tomato juice? You must have drunk a lot. The bottle's almost empty."

"Give me some . . . cold water."

He went out of the room. Through the pounding of her

head she remembered turning the bottle up and drinking. What a fool she had been! Why had she done it? Oh, yes, it was because of the skinny old man, the lawyer who had come to tell her that Milt Parson had taken all of his property and put it where she could never have it. The dirty son of a bitch. Both of them were dirty sons of bitches.

Bradford came back with ice water and tomato juice. She drank them both. Then she remembered that she had told Don not to come to the cottage.

"Why did you do it?" she demanded. "You shouldn't have come here."

"I had to, Scylla. I wanted to tell you that they came and questioned me about you. I think they think you killed your husband. But I told them where you were."

"They asked you?" She knew then that Grayson did not accept any of her statements until he checked them. "Then why did you come here? You stupid fool! Don't you see what they'd think if they found you coming here? What if they followed you? What if they saw you leaving here now?"

She saw the pain in his eyes. "But, Scylla, I had to see you."

"You had to!" she screamed, though it hurt her throat. "All you're thinking about is yourself. Don't you realize what you're doing to me?"

"But, Scylla, I . . ."

"You God-damned fool! You've got to get out of here, quick. Get out of here, and don't let anyone see you leaving. Get out, do you hear? You God-damned fool!"

The next two weeks were increasingly nightmarish for Scylla. Grayson telephoned on Wednesday and came an hour later. He brought with him the transcribed statement which he and Martin had taken from her.

"We've checked everything in this, Mrs. Parson," he said, "and found it correct."

"I'm glad you did," she said. "I wanted you to know that I was telling you the truth the best I could."

He handed her the pages, and she read them over quickly. Then she took his pen and signed her name at the bottom. Grayson then signed as a witness to her signature.

"Then this is the end of the investigations? So far as I'm concerned?"

"An investigation never ends, Mrs. Parson, until we have solved a crime and brought the guilty party into a court of law."

"But I'm clear now?"

"So far as we can tell. A Mr. Bradford gave us a statement that confirmed what you had told us. Therefore you could not have killed your husband," he said, and paused before adding, "if you were in the Shoreline Theater at the time."

There was something about the manner in which Grayson said it that let her know that he was not clearing her; instead he was only stating that the evidence then showed that she was in the clear. He folded the statement, put it into an envelope and then into his inside coat pocket.

"You have no clues as to the murderer?"

"I must admit we haven't. It's a very peculiar case. We always look first for the motive; at least we try to eliminate those who might well have had a motive. In this case we have found only one person who might have had a motive."

"Who?"

"You, Mrs. Parson."

"But why would I have killed him?"

"I didn't say that you did or even that you had a motive. I say that you might have had a motive. Always in family relations there are things which become motives for murder. You had been married to him for eight years, and any number of things could have developed in that time to give you a motive for murdering him."

"Why do you say these things when you know I didn't kill him?"

"I didn't say I knew you didn't, Mrs. Parson. Your statement shows that, of course. And we can find nothing wrong with your statement."

He was a tenacious sort of man, and she found herself hating him more and more. She knew that unless he got off onto another trail, he might always be trying to find what was wrong with her statement, so long as he believed only she could have had a motive.

Then she remembered the money Milt had withdrawn from the bank accounts.

"Couldn't it have been robbery, Lieutenant? I've learned that my husband took nearly eleven thousand dollars from our bank accounts within the last month. I don't know what he did with it."

"We've learned that, too, Mrs. Parson."

It surprised her a little to know that the police had checked the banks. "I think he must have had it at the house. Maybe someone knew about it and killed him for it."

"That's a very good possibility, Mrs. Parson. The question

would be who would know about the money, if he did have it at the house. When we learned about this, we first thought that you'd be the person who knew about it, since it was from your joint accounts."

"But I didn't know it until Monday — after Milton was dead."

"Yes, we know that, Mrs. Parson. The bank employees told us about your surprise when you discovered it."

"Then you know I didn't have that for a motive."

"Yes, we do. But there's another thing that puzzles us. Mr. Parson did a very peculiar thing when he also deeded his one half interest in all community properties to another person."

Grayson seemed to know everything. "I don't understand that myself," she said.

"And you weren't happy about it, were you?"

"No, I wasn't. Not because of the property, but because I don't know why he did it. I can only suppose he sold it."

"That's the unusual part of it, Mrs. Parson. He didn't sell it. He gave it away. And the only reason he would have given it away, so far as we can see, was to keep you from getting it."

"I don't believe that," she said. "Milt had no reason to give it away to keep me from getting it. We'd both worked for it. It was mine as much as his."

"That's true, Mrs. Parson. But there's something very unusual about a man who just ups and gives everything he owns to someone else. We'd like to know more about that."

She realized that the more she talked the closer she was getting Grayson onto her trail. "Well, I didn't know anything about that until after he was dead."

"We know that, too, Mrs. Parson. And that also makes it peculiar."

"Well, I've tried to help you as much as I could, Lieutenant. But I naturally resent your continued suspicion of me."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Parson. I'm sorry we have to work this way."

She didn't want to let him get her angry. "You can always depend upon me to help you," she said.

"That's very nice of you, Mrs. Parson." He stood up to leave. "I may be calling on you later. Anyway, I'll let you know from time to time how the investigations are progressing."

She was glad to see him leave. Although he had admitted that her alibi was unshakable, he had also told her that he

was not entirely satisfied. And she knew that she would have to be on her guard for a long time.

The prospects of being forever on her guard frightened Scylla. Across her mind went the thought that the best thing she could do was to clear up everything and get as far away from Grayson as possible. She would go to another state. Florida might be nicer than California, anyway, she thought.

But there was nothing she could do until the legal affairs were settled. As it was now, she was helpless, and Old Man Williamson refused to do one thing until his client had returned and given him full instructions. He would not even allow Garcia to buy a fresh supply of feed for the rabbits, although he could have gotten a special rate on it, because there was sufficient for several more days. All income from the rabbitry and from rents Williamson insisted, had to be deposited in the bank in a trust fund pending permanent arrangements. The only concession he made at all was that Scylla could continue to occupy the Seal Beach cottage, with the understanding she would make some adjustment with the other half owner, if he so desired it, concerning a fair rent.

Williamson was too stubborn and too precise for Scylla. She found herself in a miserable state. Although she owned without question one half of everything, she still could do nothing with it. She owned one half, but that was all she owned. She could not issue any orders, collect any money, or make any plans. In effect, she had nothing except the money she had already withdrawn from the bank.

Completely frustrated for the first time in her life, Scylla found herself drinking more and more. She had never cared for alcohol before, but now it helped her to ease the horrible tensions within her, to close out the fears which seemed to be crowding closer and closer to her from all sides.

Twice that week Don Bradford telephoned. The first time she was very angry with him and cursed him for contacting her. She was afraid that Grayson might have the telephone lines tapped. The second time she was tempted to see him. She had to admit to herself that she needed someone to lean on, someone who understood her and could give her comfort. But she didn't dare take the chance of being seen with Don.

Samuel J. Peterson returned from Europe three days earlier than expected. Williamson telephoned the news to her. Scylla waited all day at the Seal Beach cottage for Peterson to call her. She was afraid he never would. By evening she decided she had to see him even if she had to go to him.

Scylla found Peterson's Beverly Hills home by the lighted

numbers on the stone towerlike posts between which hung two great wrought-iron gates. The place sat deep behind forbidding walls of more stones covered with ivy. The gate-man admitted her only after using the telephone in his booth at the gate.

As she steered the car up the curved driveway, she got a glimpse of the swimming pool to the left. As she approached the huge front door, it swung open silently. A butler bowed and admitted her, then asked her to be seated in the entry hall. He motioned to the several hand-carved, high-backed, plush-covered chairs lining the wall. She took the nearest one, and her eyes went to the great winding staircase sweeping down from the second floor. It was the kind of staircase she had once dreamed of having for her own.

Half an hour later Samuel J. Peterson came bouncing down the winding stairs. His belly jounced with each step. He wore yellowish slacks and a shirt of wild, mad colors. But the startling dress did not disguise his bigger potbelly, his more florid face, his whiter fringe of hair around his balder pate. Except for these things and the fact that the cigar in his flabbier mouth was longer and blacker, he looked as he had the day he'd picked her up outside of El Paso.

A broad smile covered his reddish face. She stood up as he came toward her. "Scylla!" he exclaimed. "Nice to see you."

He took both her hands, looked at her with frank admiration. Then he stepped back, chewed his cigar. "Turn around, baby. All the way around. Want to get a good look at you."

She turned for him, suddenly forgetting her tensions, much as she had once turned for him in the Douglas hotel eight years before.

"Baby, I wasn't wrong. You've got things. You're still a size sixteen. Still need a thirty-six bra with extra large cups. It's remarkable, baby. You've kept everything you had before."

She found herself glowing with a new hope. He liked her now as he had once liked her. He would not cause her trouble. Then she had not gotten what she wanted from him, but she would this time.

"You're more beautiful, baby. You've ripened since that time. I'm happy to see you again."

He led her into the enormous drawing room and handed her onto a triple-sized divan. Then he sat beside her.

"Drink, baby? What would you like?"

She told him Scotch and soda, and he rang a bell and then gave instructions to the butler.

"Funny, damned funny, baby, that we meet again. And like this. You've done well for yourself. Almost wish I had time to be a full partner with you now. Good business, these rabbits and apartment houses. Glad I started you off."

"Started me?"

"Didn't I send you to Milt? Remember the note I left for you?"

Now for the first time she knew who had left the note and the five-dollar bill tucked in the door of the Venice garage room. She wanted to ask him how he came to do it, but he answered before she asked.

"Had a little trouble finding you. Never occurred to me that you'd have trouble finding a job or something else. Then one of my boys told me you were on the loose, Hanging around bars, he said. I figured you'd appreciate a job with Milt. But you did more than that. You up and married him." He chuckled.

"I did appreciate it then and now," she said.

She thought that maybe she had worried too much about handling Peterson. He wasn't going to be difficult, she felt.

"Too bad you can't be a partner with me," she went on.

"I suppose then you don't want the business, the half of it."

"Oh, no, baby. What would I want with it? I have plenty. I only took the stuff to please Milt. Funny guy, Milton was. Never thought he'd be that way."

Her fears calmed now, she wanted to know how and why Milt had come to know Peterson.

"You were related to Milt?"

"Not really, baby. His mother was the sister of a man who married my oldest sister. Complicated, isn't it? But we were no real relatives."

"Then why did Milt give the property to you?"

"You mean why did he give it away, or why did he give it to me, baby?"

"Both."

"He gave it to me, he said, because I was as near a thing to a relative as he could find. Everybody else is gone. And he said he'd like to give it to me because he thought he could trust me to carry out his wishes."

"His wishes? Sounds like a will. Did he know he was going to die?"

"In a way I think he did, baby. He was afraid you'd kill him."

She jerked up, startled now. "But . . ."

"Did you, baby? You kill him?" Peterson looked directly

into her eyes, but kept smiling pleasantly. She did not know whether he was trying to accuse her or whether he was trying to joke with her without realizing the grimness of his humor.

"That's what he was afraid of, baby — you killing him to get the property. So he said he wanted to give it to me to keep you from getting it."

She couldn't talk now. She could only listen with an awful sickening feeling inside her.

"He wanted me to take the property and hold it for him. If anything did happen to him, he wanted me to have the property."

"Then . . . then you're going to keep it?"

"Not really, baby. As I told you, I have plenty. I'm going to give it all away. That's what I'm going to do with it."

"Give it . . ." Scylla could not understand why Milt had given everything to Peterson, and now she didn't understand why Peterson wanted to give it all away again.

"Yes, baby. I'm giving it all to a girls' school."

"Girls' school?"

"Yes, baby. I know one that's the real thing. I think Milt would like me to do it. In fact, he mentioned the school himself once when we talked. He thought they were doing great work."

"What . . ."

"Well, baby, it's the kind of school you should have had a chance at. It's a school where they're teaching girls to be women."

"Women?"

"Yes, baby. Most of our schools now are trying to teach women to be like men, and, baby, it doesn't work. The men are unhappy, and the women are even more unhappy. They're all trying to be equal to men, be just like men, and, baby, it's all a mess."

"Women are just as . . ."

"As good as men, baby? That's not what I'm talking about. The point is that women are women and must act like women, not like men. Men are men, and they must act like men. We're not the same, baby, any way you want to take it."

"But women have their rights."

"Sure, baby. But they have their responsibilities, too. Their job is to be women and not try to be like men."

As Peterson talked, sometimes shaking his long black cigar, but always in a kindly way, Scylla found herself unable to protest. She felt rather than knew that he was telling her something which she had somehow missed in life. He was

putting straight some of the horrible twisted knots in her thinking.

"It's woman's place, baby, to be the mother of man. And being mother of man doesn't mean she can spank or whip or beat him into submission to her. That kind of mother is a menace to man, baby. She keeps him always a little boy. He never gets to be a man. The kind I'm talking about, baby, is the mother who is a full and honest woman — all woman, baby. She's the kind who gives understanding to her man. She's got to give him the kind of understanding that's not the intellectual kind, baby. Women get all messed up in trying to be intellectual. A woman's got a sense and feeling which is greater than the intellectual stuff, baby. And that's what she's got to learn, baby, and learn to give to man." He picked up his glass. "Am I boring you, baby? Didn't mean to give a lecture."

"No . . . no," she said.

"You see, baby, that's where you got all fouled up. You've been trying to get things from men without giving, by out-smarting them. You wanted to be superior to man, and you got messed up. You can never be superior to man on an intellectual plane, baby. That's his field. You women have something greater than that, if you'd learn to use it. You never recognized what it was you had, did you? You remember Douglas, Phoenix, Venice, baby?"

She dropped her head and wondered why she had a feeling of embarrassment.

"I've remembered many times, baby. Sometimes with a lot of pleasure. But, baby, I knew then that you weren't trying to give anything. You were just trying to get. You were trying to tell me what to do, not trying to do something with me. It was fun, baby, but it wasn't satisfying. That's why I never went back for you at the Venice hotel, baby."

She did not say anything.

"And, baby, from what Milt told me, I had you pegged right. You've missed something, baby. Missed something big and great. You've spent all your time hating men, forcing them to your will, using them for your purpose of getting things. Well, baby, you got a lot of things. Williamson tells me there's nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of property. Half of that'll keep you nicely as long as you want to live. So, baby, you got your things — but you missed the most important thing of all. Baby, you missed getting your man. You missed letting yourself be a woman. A woman be-

comes a woman only with a man. You never were with one, baby."

She couldn't look him in the face any longer.

"Yes, baby, that's what you missed. You could have found that completion with me if you'd tried. You could have had it with Milton, maybe with a dozen other guys. And maybe you can still find it, baby. I hope you can. But, baby, you've sure missed the boat as it is now. You've missed being a woman."

He paused to reach for his empty glass. There were hot tears creeping into her eyes. She couldn't remember when she had shed tears.

She looked up and saw his short, potbellied figure standing by the table mixing more drinks. And she suddenly made herself laugh. Made herself hate this strange little man who had no physical form to recommend him, but who had a sharp, keen mind with which he could beat her down with his words, whip her with the cutting lash of his logic, crush her with the sincerity of his soul.

"You!" she laughed. "You telling me about love! You talking about women, because you aren't man enough to do anything about them!"

Her anger, once started, seemed to feed upon itself. He sat back on the divan, making no effort to halt her. Her voice raised. She pointed her finger at him.

"I gave you something," she accused him. "I gave you everything I had. Let you parade me around to arouse your passions, get you hot enough to do something. You said a lot of stuff about beauty. Beauty! That's a good one! You had to trick me into walking naked for you to pep up your sagging passions. That's all it was. I was stupid enough to almost believe what you said then."

He sat looking straight at her. She paced across the thick, luscious rug. "And I almost believed you when you said all those lies about me being a movie star. You almost made me believe I had something special. But all you wanted was to get me into bed. You stupid men all talk about your high ideals, but all you want is to get worked up and then popped off. You tell a woman lies and more lies to get her to let you put your hands on her. Then you keep pouring out your lies until you get her on her back and her legs opened up. And then what can you do? You do nothing. You relieve yourself, and to hell with her."

"We women are the fools. We sometimes almost believe you. We try to get something, and we don't get it. And now

you sit there and tell me that we only try to get your things. Well, by God, they are our things! What did Milt Parson ever give me? He gave me nothing. I worked. I slaved. I taught him, God damn him! I was good to him. I let him have his fun. But I didn't let the son of a bitch get me. That's what you're trying to tell me I should have done. I should have let him have me. That's foolishness. And now the dirty son of a bitch has cheated me out of what I wanted, what was mine."

She paused, and he got off the divan. "Well, baby, I guess there's no use in my talking to you. You're a little too dumb to see it. You gave Milt plenty — I don't say that. Plenty of sex — you've got the body to do that. But you never gave him plenty of yourself, for you haven't a heart, baby. You're a hard, tough one, baby. I see your kind every day. We've got more of them in the picture business than any other business, I guess. So, baby, go your way and weep. For tears are all you'll ever have."

Suddenly the crisis in her had passed. The anger was gone. It had been purged, and she felt empty and alone. And Samuel J. Peterson stood there and looked at her with pity in his eyes. Suddenly she had an impulse to drop at this funny little man's feet and pour out her real self, to tell him about the self she had always kept locked deep inside her, the self she had always been afraid to show.

But she was afraid it would do no good. This funny little man wouldn't care now. He might have cared one time eight years ago, but he wouldn't care now. It was too late to tell him.

She turned and walked toward the door.

She was almost out of the room before he said, "You wanted to talk about the arrangements, Scylla? The property?"

She didn't answer him. She just kept walking. The butler opened the door, and she walked out into the night.

As Scylla drove down the curved driveway, she saw the iron gate was open. The gateman was admitting another car. It was a black-and-white car, and she knew it was a police car. As the car passed her, she caught a glimpse of the man at the wheel. She was sure it was Grayson.

Instantly she knew that Grayson was calling on Peterson to ask him what he knew about the case. And she remembered that Peterson had asked her if she had killed Milt. She wondered what Peterson would tell Grayson. If he told him that Milt had given his property to him because Milt was

afraid she would kill him, then Grayson would never stop in his hunt for the evidence which would convict her. Even if Peterson tried to protect her, she knew Grayson would get out of Peterson what he wanted to know.

Strangely enough, the thought of Grayson finding out how Milt had felt didn't seem so important now. More important were the feelings within her, or rather the emptiness of her emotions after what Peterson had said to her.

The Seal Beach cottage was dark. She put her car in the garage and climbed the steps to the front door. She put her key in the lock and pushed open the door. Then she had a feeling that there was somebody in the house, and she was terribly afraid. She clicked on a light and saw for herself that there was no one in the room. She went into each room and found no one.

Yet she could not shake the feeling. She could hear the soft lash of the surf on the beach, and suddenly she wanted to be near the sea. She knotted the green-and-white scarf around her head and went down the steps. The night was soft and warm. The moon was riding high but occasionally was blotted out by great tufts of dark clouds which rode the winds from off the Pacific.

Far out on the beach the shadow of the three boulders stood out. She walked across the sand to them. She must relax and think. She must put aside her emotions and decide what she would do.

Inside the shelter of the boulders, Scylla slipped quickly out of her clothing, then slowly stretched her slender figure on the moist sand. The sand felt hard and was unmoving to her weight, and she wondered if it, too, was trying to reject her. But she let the thought slip by as she forced her muscles to relax.

How long Scylla lay there listening to the sounds of the sea, seeing the moon through the clouds, feeling the occasional lash of the surf as it crept farther up the beach and licked at her bare feet, she did not know. Time was of no importance and had no place in her being. Instead of concentrating her conscious mind on her problems, she found that she was loosening her consciousness and letting it, too, slip away. She was not now a thinking being. She was only a feeling being.

Scylla was lost so far from the world that she was not aware of the figure coming across the beach, following the trail of her steps in the sand. She did not feel him as he dropped onto the sand and touched her. She did not hear him say, "Scylla! Scylla, you beautiful thing!"

Then it came to her, and she jerked up. "Donniel"

He was sitting in the wet sand alongside of her now, his feet extending the opposite way so that they faced each other. "I had to come to see you, Scylla."

The moon bathed his smooth, clean face and left soft lights in his eyes. She did not listen to what he was saying then, for she was trying to find something in his eyes which she had never seen in the eyes of a man but felt must be there.

"Scylla, I had to come to tell you. Grayson was at the theater for hours this evening. He questioned and questioned and questioned. He talked to everybody. My God, I thought the man would never leave!"

"You're a very handsome man, Donnie," she said, and put up her hand and ran it through his hair.

He turned his head to avoid her hand. "Scylla! Listen to me. Grayson checked everything. He kept asking about the program. When he learned that we didn't run 'The Lost Week End' after six, he was very excited. He said, 'I've got it now. Now I know.' What did he mean by that, Scylla?"

She dropped back onto the sand. "Donnie, look at me, please." It was not a command, but a request. "Tell me, Donnie."

His eyes swept slowly over the full length of her figure. She saw it happening again, the thing which had happened always when men looked at her body. It was that look in their eyes, the want and the need. "You're beautiful," he said with a voice filled with tension. "You're the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

She had heard the same words from other men. But now she heard them differently. She had always thought they were words of trickery, of deceit, words used only to get her to give her body to them. But now it was different. It wasn't the look of ugly want. What she now saw in the eyes of Don Bradford was a need which was beautiful. He needed her, and she needed him.

She lifted her arms and caressed his hot cheek with her fingers. She ran them over his eyes, closing them as she did, and over his nose and across his lips. She let her hand drink in the shape and feel of him. And then she began to feel his hand on her. It was hot and moist, but hard and tough. She reached with her other hand and pressed his hand down hard into the flesh of her stomach. When his hand sought her great, throbbing breasts and squeezed, she said, "Harder, Donniel"

He fell on top of her, and she squirmed to get farther beneath him. She wanted to feel the weight of him on her. She wanted now to be beneath him, not only because she wanted it that way, but because she knew from her inner depth that this was the way he wanted it and the way it should always be.

For the first time in her life Scylla found that she was not thinking of what she wanted, except an enormous want to give to him, to be together with this man. She did not want to take from this man. She wanted to give. She wanted to open up her body and wanted him to open up her soul. She realized now that she was an incomplete, an unfinished being without this man to complete her, to make her being full. Alone she was nothing. With him she was a part of something greater than either.

The dark clouds had blotted out the moon entirely now, leaving only an inky darkness. The wind which drove the clouds now dipped down to drive the sea. The surf increased its tempo, increased its sound, lapped farther and farther over the beach. But Scylla knew nothing of it, for she was lost in the fathomless depth of her giving, in fulfillment which was without time and without space. It had no relation to anything conscious. It was the endless circle of life, life without beginning and without end.

CHAPTER XV

It was the sea, the sea which held such strange fascination for Scylla, which rudely yanked her back from that timeless and spaceless circle of underconsciousness and onto the straight line of consciousness. The oncoming tide lashed farther and farther onto the sandy beach. Then, almost suddenly, it reached in to strike against the three giant boulders splashing its salty waters over them.

For a moment Scylla did not notice. She was sheltered by the thickness and the breadth of his body. Even when she did feel the water running through her reddish hair, soiling the green-and-white scarf, stinging her eyes and choking off her nostrils, she was not afraid, for he held her tighter in his protective arms.

"Holy smokel!" he exclaimed. "We've got to get out of here."
He leaped to his feet, pulling her up with him. "Hey!" he

cried as he snatched for their clothing to keep the water from sucking it into the sea. "We're getting drowned!"

She laughed. His strong hands grabbed her shoulders, steadying her and then turning her. "Around here."

He guided her through the inky darkness around the boulders to the other side. The wind again lashed the sea against the rocks and whined around their sharp edges. As he fumbled through the water-soaked garments to find her dress, thunder rolled across the heavens, and a sheet of light momentarily showed her to him and him to her. Quickly he untangled the dress and modestly wrapped it around her nakedness.

She still laughed, and he laughed, too. "We're crazy!"

"Crazy!" she repeated after him. "Crazy."

It was crazy, insane, madcap. And she didn't care. Another flash of light showed her his face. She saw him smiling through the rain which was beginning to fall, streaking his hair down over his eyes.

He had his trousers on then. His chest naked, his feet bare, he tried to cram all their other pieces of clothing under his arm. "Come on!" he shouted above the wind as his hand seized hers.

She followed him in a wild race across the sand toward the cottage.

They burst through the door, spilling water and sand over the floor and the rug. And Scylla did not notice. She was laughing, a breathless, joyful sort of laughter which she had never known until this moment. She grabbed him and pressed her wet figure against him. "Oh, Don! Don!" was all she could say.

The clothing flopped to the floor from under his arms, and he drew her to him. He was still laughing, too.

"We could have been washed to sea," he said.

"Could we?" she said. "Who cares!" And she thought how nice it might have been if they had actually been washed out into the sea. Then they would never have had to return to a world which had always been ugly and hateful to her.

Suddenly he pushed her out an arm's length from him. "Hey, you'd better get out of that wet thing. Get something dry on."

"But you?" she said. "You're wet, too, darling. You must have something dry, too."

"Don't worry about me," he said. "Now you get something dry on. I'll be all right. I'll have to dry out my clothes, anyway."

"Wait," she said. She ran into the bedroom and flung open the closet. She dug along the rod of garments until she found a heavy robe. It was one which Milt had given her. She had never worn it. It would fit Don.

She ran back to the living room. "Here, darling. Let me take your things off and put this on you. I'll dry your clothes for you."

He looked at the dress stuck by its wetness to her body. "Get something for yourself," he ordered. "I'll hang my things over the furnace. Now go on like I told you."

Every part of her seemed to glow with the wondrousness of the feeling of wanting to do things for him, with having him so concerned about her, and with having him tell her what to do. She felt like a little girl being tenderly ordered about by her father.

"I'll have to wash this sand off me," she said. "And you, too. We're a mess."

"Okay," he said. "You go ahead now and shower. I'll take one when you're finished."

She hurried into the bathroom, pulled off her dress, removed the scarf still around her head, and stepped into the shower. When she had finished, she suddenly realized that she had nothing in the bathroom to put on, and for the first time she felt embarrassed at the thought of running naked through the house where he might see her. She had never thought about nakedness before, had never known modesty. She did not understand why she should now feel this way.

She wrapped a towel around herself and darted from the bathroom into her bedroom without his seeing her. "Okay, Don," she called, and a moment later she heard him go into the bathroom.

She went to the closet, but she could not decide what she should put on. She did not want to wear just a robe, for now there was this sense of modesty in her. She did not want to put on a nightgown, for now she did not want to go to bed. Finally she turned to her bureau and found undergarments and began to dress completely again. She remembered a simple yellow dress she had. Somehow it was the kind of dress she now wanted to put on.

He was standing at the window looking out into the storm-lashed night when she came out of the bedroom. The too-small robe was drawn tight across his shoulders, and his bare, hairy legs showed below it. His clothing was hung on chairs around the floor furnace. She saw that they were not hung neatly, and she went over and straightened them. Then

she tiptoed quietly up behind him and stood there waiting for him to know that she was there.

She waited for what seemed a long time. Finally she said his name softly. "Don."

He turned around as though startled, then smiled and reached out his arm. She went into the crook of his arm and leaned against his chest so closely she could hear the steady beat of his heart.

He said nothing. Finally she said, "What are you thinking?"

"Us," he said. "About us. You and me."

"What?"

"Everything."

"You're not sorry?"

"Sorry? God, no. I'm happy."

"You don't sound like it."

"But I am." He tightened his arms around her.

"You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure." He leaned to put his lips on hers.

Together they moved to the couch and sat down, still holding each other. She squirmed closer to him, wanting to crawl inside him, to become lost in him. She could not seem to get close enough to him.

"What were you thinking about us?"

"Oh, everything."

"But what?" She felt she had to know.

"About what we were going to do. How soon we could get married."

"Married?" She had never thought of marriage.

"Of course," he said as though there could be no question about it.

"I'm older than you," she reminded him.

"That makes no difference. I love you, and you love me. Ages don't matter. Anyway, you're not so much older."

"You really want to marry me?"

"How can you doubt it, Scylla? After what we've been to each other."

"After what we've been . . ." she said, and she knew she could not doubt that.

"I'll check out of school at the end of the week."

She thought of all his plans about school. She didn't want him to give them up. "But why?"

"I've got to find a job. Got to earn enough to support you."

"But I've got plenty, Don. You can go on to school. I don't need any money."

"You think I could take that?" He dropped one arm from around her. "I could never let you support me."

She could not understand this. "But it would be for you, for both of us," she said. "You can finish your school, and then you can make a lot of money."

He shook his head. "I just couldn't."

"Don't be silly, Don. I've got the money. Why shouldn't you use it?"

He pulled the other arm from in back of her. "No, Scylla. I couldn't do it. Not let you support me. Not even for an education."

"But, Don, I want to do it."

He got up from the couch and walked to the window again. She watched him, and she knew somehow that she was losing him. She could not stand to lose him, not now that she had once found him. She went over to the window, pulled him around, and reached up and kissed him.

"How much school do you have to go yet, Don?" She had to find a way to convince him.

He sighed. "Four years, if I go all I want to yet. I could finish in another two."

"If you had twenty thousand dollars, could you go to school and marry me, too?"

"Twenty thousand! I'd be wealthy. I could do anything with twenty thousand. But that's like asking for the moon. Where would I get twenty thousand?"

She kissed him again. "I'll give it to you."

"You!"

"Give it to you, darling. It'll be yours then. Not mine. Then you'll have the money. You'll support me."

He pushed her away. "Oh, no. Not that."

"But, Don!"

He left her standing there as he walked across the room and felt of his clothes. She was sure they were not dry completely. Yet he began taking them off the backs of the chairs.

"They're wet," she objected. "You can't . . ."

"Not very," he said. He went toward the bathroom.

She sat back on the couch and tried to think. She knew that somehow she had offended him, and she could not understand it. Why was he so stubborn as not to see that she did not care for the money? Why couldn't he understand that all she wanted to do was to help him? She was willing to give him twenty thousand or everything. She only wanted

to do something for him. She wanted to be generous. But he wouldn't listen to her.

Don came out of the bathroom dressed in his damp, wrinkled clothing. Scylla went to him and again sought his arms, his lips. She impelled him back toward the couch. But the touch of his lips was not the same touch which had been there earlier.

Knowing but still unable to recognize it, Scylla sensed that she had somehow lost this man, the only man with whom she had ever found a unity. Almost automatically she resorted to the only weapon she had ever thought she possessed. She pressed herself closer and closer against him, seeking his lips with her lips, exploring his physical self with her hands, directing his hands upon her physical self. Wantonly she offered, sought, demanded.

But somehow there was no longer a response. His lips touched her lips. His hands touched her body. His eyes looked into her eyes. Yet there was something lacking. He was with her, yet he was apart from her. He was there in the room, there on the couch, yet he was not in the room, he was not on the couch. He was in her arms, yet he was not in her arms. His lips touched her lips, but he did not kiss her. His hands touched her, but did not feel her. His eyes looked at her, but did not see her. There was an awful emptiness in her.

Slowly through the confusion in Scylla there came an understanding. Painfully a knowledge was born to her out of the depth of herself. And then suddenly she knew what she must do. She began to feel full again.

She pulled away from him, untangled her arms and legs from his. Then she stood up. "Get out!" She pointed toward the door. "Get out!"

"But, Scylla . . ." he rose to protest.

"Get out!" she repeated. "Out!"

She saw the horrible pain in his eyes. She knew he did not understand and knew that she could never make him understand, because she did not quite know herself. Her heart twisted at the pain she saw in him. She had never before been sorry to see the pain she caused in a man's eyes. But now she was sorry, terribly sorry. Always before she had caused that pain in a man's eyes because she hated him. But now she had to cause the pain in him because she loved a man. Always before she had brought pain to a man because she hated him and did not want to see him happy in love.

Now she had to cause him pain because she loved him and did not want to see him unhappy in love.

"Get out!"

Slowly, then hurriedly, he went to the door and out into the pouring rain. She thought how useless it had been to attempt to dry his clothes, for now he would be soaked again before he could reach his car.

For a long time after the door closed, Scylla stood there in the center of the room staring at the blank, solid panel. It was closed. It would never again open. Finally she slumped to the floor.

Later Scylla pulled herself up from the floor. She went to the desk and got out pen and paper. Carefully she wrote two letters, deliberately forming each word as if to express herself more definitely. One she put into an envelope and addressed it to Mr. Samuel J. Peterson. Somehow she didn't like the title. She took another envelope and addressed it to Samuel J. Peterson, Esq. The other one she addressed to Norman Parker, her lawyer.

Then she set about straightening up the house. She wanted everything neat and orderly and, above all, clean. She found her green-and-white scarf in the bathroom where she had dropped it. She tied it again over her hair.

Dawn was lifting over the Hollywood hills and spilling down across the coastal plain and on into the Pacific as she walked out over the sandy beach toward the three giant boulders. It was a fresh, clean dawn. The storm seemed to have cleansed everything on the outside as another storm had cleansed her on the inside.

She stood touching the great boulders, sheltered in their cove, watching the clean dawn. She ran her hand over the jagged points of the rocks, feeling their keenness and knowing their roughness.

The early light was beginning to catch the tiny tips of the ripples on the sea's surface. The surface rose and fell gently as the great body of water breathed deeply in its ceaseless restlessness. Slowly she left the shelter of the solid rocks and walked across the uncertain sands toward the water.

The water was beginning to drag at the hem of her yellow dress when involuntarily she twisted her head around to look once more at the cottage. She saw a familiar black-and-white car stopping in front. She recognized the big form of the man getting out of it. Then she saw him striding across the beach toward her.

She turned back to the sea. Milt was somewhere in that sea, and suddenly she knew there was something she had to tell him.

She began to walk — and she began to cry.

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